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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Perfectibility in Emerson

BY

Carolyn Jane Labun

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

FALL 1992

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Carolyn Jane Labun

Carolyn Jane Labun
34805 Sandon Place
Abbotsford, British Columbia V3G 1G4

September 3 1992

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Perfectibility in Emerson submitted by Carolyn Jane Labun in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Prof. M. Ross (Supervisor)

Prof. R. Hoffpauir

Prof. G. Watson

Prof. B. Smith

Prof. H. Trimpi (External Examiner)

Dedication

In memory of Alice Marion Berk de Hay

1930 - 1988

Abstract

Central to Emerson's thought is his belief in the perfectibility of the self-reliant individual. The concept of perfectibility is an ancient one, and it has been significant (whether through denial or full acceptance) to American thought from the time of the first Puritan settlements. The concern with perfection is connected to American rhetorical theory by virtue of the importance given to the spoken word (as conveyor of grace, instruction, or provocation) to the Puritans, the Unitarians, and the Transcendentalists. Emerson sought to achieve a style in which he could appropriately express his ever-increasing confidence in the power of the self-reliant individual. Most commentators on Emerson accept Emersonian perfectibility; few save Yvor Winters and Quentin Anderson have stopped to consider what would be the effects on a society if Emerson's doctrines were applied, as Anderson shows they have been, and with devastating results. In the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction we can see other such critiques of Emerson -- Hawthorne was able to imaginatively construct plots in which Emersonian-inspired choices result in tragedy and social dislocation.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold both offer alternatives to Emerson -- both are concerned with perfectibility but both demand of themselves and their readers a deep concern for the actual, whereas Emersonian perfectibility demands a disregard for the sanctity of the other and a disregard for the needs of the community.

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Chapter One
Introduction

The disparity amongst the persons who have appropriated various of Ralph Waldo Emerson's aphorisms to inspire or justify their own lives and professions points to one of the oddities of Emerson himself. Bank presidents and visionaries (with ministers and teachers poised, perhaps, between the extremes of financier and mystic) can find something in Emerson to give focus and meaning to their lives. To say this is to say little new about Emerson; it is merely to recognize, as did James Russell Lowell in *A Fable for Critics*, that the Sage of Concord was both mystic and Yankee, a "Plotinus-Montaigne":

> But to come back to Emerson, (whom, by the way,
> I believe we left waiting), - his is, we may say,
> A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders, whose range
> Has Olympus for one pole, for t'other the Exchange. . . . [1]

If, as is commonly accepted, it is true that Emerson's personality comprehended both visionary and practical tendencies, it shouldn't be especially surprizing that he should include among his admirers representatives of both types. Quentin Anderson, in his sharply critical study of Emerson's influence on American thought and culture, *The Imperial Self*, points toward one quality shared by both the mystic and the magnate: individualism. Anderson comments on this trait as being stereotypically American, and describes it as an ideal that "stands for the energy, inventiveness, and adaptability of Americans committed to commercial or industrial enterprise." He continues, in passages I will discuss later, by examining the consequences of this individualism, which fosters "impersonality in social and economic relations," and by describing the individualist (who might, in our terms, equally be Yankee or mystic, Plotinus or Montaigne) as "the man who subjects others to himself through his shrewdness in gauging their appetites or anticipating their needs" [2]. If Cornelius Vanderbilt or Andrew Carnegie seem to fit this description of the individualist most accurately, we need only think of Thoreau or, as I will suggest, the fictional Jay Gatsby to realize that the Emersonian-inspired dreamer is equally entranced

with the power available to the truly rugged individual and equally prepared to subject the other. In their cases, certainly, different aspects of nature and humanity constitute the objects of their desire to gain ascendency. When Emerson (or Thoreau) set out to possess the whole world, it wasn't in terms of mines or miles of track --or, Gatsby-like, piles of shirts -- but it was equally an act of expropriation and possession.

In this dissertation I will examine what I believe to be one cause, not unconnected to the cult of individualism Quentin Anderson points us toward, of the readiness of seemingly antithetical types to be influenced by Emerson; this is his adaptation of the concept of perfectibility. Perfectibility, whether it was viewed as the end of progress or as the consequence of transcendence, was an idea that gripped Americans of many persuasions in Emerson's time. Unitarians and evangelicals, secular reformers, and certainly the colourful hosts of giddy visionaries were all in various ways involved in the continuous interpretation of perfectibility that has been a part of American thought from the moment that the first sermons given in New England began to shape the ways in which the earliest members of both the Massachusetts Bay and the Plymouth colonies perceived themselves.

Among the earliest of these sermons was one delivered by John Winthrop, future governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, while still on board the *Arabella*, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. He offered the colonists a *choice* of good or evil (perfection or spiritual death); regardless of their decision, they would form "a city on a hill," destined, if they chose to shine, to be " the light of the world," but certain, regardless, to be the object of that world's scrutiny:

> Beloved, there is now set before us life, and good,
> death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love
> the Lord our God and to love one another, to walk in His
> ways and to keep His commandments and His ordinances and
> His laws, and the articles of our covenant with Him, that we

> may live and be multiplied and that the Lord our God
> may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it.
> But if our hearts shall turn away so that we will
> not obey, but shall be seduced and worship other gods, our
> pleasures and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto
> us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land
> whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.[3]

Winthrop's concern throughout this sermon is to establish the spiritual basis for the ethical conduct of the members of his congregation. He recognizes both the possibility of failure and the frailty of man. His hope, while high, is not ecstatic. He does, however, introduce the notion of *possession*, and suggests even in this sermon that the colonists may be enabled to realize their dream of an ideal life in a new world.

The notion that an ideal state (in the minds of some it is an ideal of community; in others an ideal of separation) could be achieved in this new land remained dominant in American thought through the next two centuries, although the discussion widened to include the agents of perfectibility (grace, individual effort, education, secular progress), and the purpose of perfectibility (salvation, sanctification, the millennium, social reformation). Perfectibility was not, of course, a uniquely New World notion, and later in this chapter I will, albeit briefly, discuss the sources of the concept, and, in a subsequent chapter, begin to place Emerson within its specifically American context. Here, however, I wish to open the discussion by drawing attention to certain contrasts and connections between Winthrop's vision of newness, Emerson's, and that of a fictional character who owes his existence, I suggest, largely to Emerson: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby. This will seem an odd grouping; I am convinced that it isn't, and by drawing these three "Americans" together I hope to begin to convince my readers of the reality of the problem pointed to by Quentin Anderson: that there is that in Emerson's work that strikes at the roots of social and individual health. Emerson, however much he differs from his Puritan

forebears, has important connections to them; it is my intention now to examine the nature and extent of these.

When, almost two hundred years after John Winthrop delivered his ship-board sermon, Ralph Waldo Emerson contemplated the arrival of those first settlers, he did so in terms rather different from those available to John Winthrop. The following passage, written in 1822 when Emerson was nineteen years old, is taken from his Journal:

> There is certainly something deeply interesting in the history of one who invades the coast of an unknown continent and first breaks the silence which hath reigned there since the creation. As he goes alone to the wilderness and sets his axe to the root of the forest and we reflect that this stroke which echoes through the wood begins a dominion which shall never end till this green and silent woodland shall groan beneath the feet of countless multitudes and shall exchange the solitary warble of a bird for the noise of nations, the outcry of human passions, and the groan of human misery. Under these views the settler ceases to be an ordinary adventurer, providing for himself and his son, or his friend -- but becomes the representative of human nature, the father of the Country, and, in a great measure, the Arbiter of its future destinies.[4]

I would like to put this passage, expressive of both Emerson's life-long fascination with power and of a degree of responsibility and concern we don't usually associate with him, beside what is undoubtedly a more familiar one; what follows is taken from the last page of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Nick Carraway, the narrator, is sitting on the beach behind the now empty house of his dead friend, Jay Gatsby:

> . . . as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island

> here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes -- a fresh,
> green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees
> that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered
> in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams;
> for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his
> breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into
> an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired,
> face to face for the last time in history with something commen-
> surate to his capacity for wonder.[5]

For Winthrop, possession of America would be a spiritual act; Emerson as a youth of nineteen conceived of it as potentially tragic and in terms of the axe; Fitzgerald, in part through the fact that Emerson's later ideas were available to him (whether directly or through their absorption into American culture) offers us an image of perception as possession and a sense of both the hope that the New World inspired and the pain of finding oneself merely human in the face of such wonder. To none of these writers does the hidden presence of the Indian begin to materialize, even on the furthest verges of consciousness. Whether this failure is merely symptomatic of the cultural limitations of Winthrop, Emerson and Fitzgerald, of whether it is indicative of the quality and degree of their self-absorption, is, I think, impossible to say.

Richard Poirier, in "Is There an I for an Eye?: The Visionary Possession of America" (in *A World Elsewhere::The Place of Style in American Literature*) traces "those oddly frequent passages in the classics of American literature where the hero becomes in effect a version of Emerson's 'transparent eyeball'"[6]. Poirier argues, in part, that

> . . . in Emerson and in Fitzgerald relation to landscape is
> established by gazing at it, by an 'aesthetic contemplation'
> rather than by more palpable and profitable claims to
> ownership . . . . Disintegration of fabricated forms like

> houses and boundaries is the precondition both in Fitzgerald and in Emerson for a new integration that occurs in the contemplative-aesthetic-poetic eye.

He continues: "To use verbs of seeing and possessing in the manner of Emerson is to be necessarily satiric of the way these words are used by the society."[7] It is Poirier's contention that Emerson (and Fitzgerald) use such language as "a way of preserving imaginatively those dreams about the continent that were systematically betrayed by the possession of it for economic and political aggrandizement."[8] I argue, against Poirier, that a more extensive reading of Emerson shows him to offer (even consciously to offer) a compelling rationale for the very programs of economic possession Poirier regrets. And indeed, elsewhere Poirier recognizes (what I believe to be more frequently the case) that "Emerson in . . . many . . . instances is victim of what Santayana calls the 'kindly infidelities of language,' its tendency to 'vitiate the experience it expresses.'"[9] Thus it is often the case that Emerson's expressed intention is undercut by his language: a confusion of intention, rather than a controlled irony, motivates such instances.

Jay Gatsby strikes me, as I am sure he has struck many others, as one of the most Emersonian of characters in American literature, since in conceiving Gatsby Fitzgerald has set the "Greek head" on (corrupt and would-be) "Yankee shoulders," uniting in him Platonic idealism and American push, dreamer and entrepreneur. To assert such a connection between the morally upright Emerson and Gatsby presents, of course, a problem: Gatsby, for all his considerable charm, remains a bootlegger for whom the Holy Grail has become possession of his neighbour's wife. He is a criminal and a spendthrift, who squanders his criminally acquired fortune entertaining swarms of intellectually and morally vapid drifters who care as little for their host (who has enticed them with his "gorgeous" lights, music and liquor) as he does for his parasitic guests. He is hardly a character of whom the thrifty, abstemious, novel-detesting Emerson would have approved, yet there are compelling points of contact between the two. It isn't simply the fact that both

Emerson and Gatsby were overwhelmed by guests, both invited and uninvited.[10] More significantly, there are important connections between the Emersonian concepts of perfectibility and self reliance, and the character created by Fitzgerald in Jay Gatsby. That Emerson would have, in all likelihood, despised and disowned Jay Gatsby doesn't absolve him of the responsibility of having fathered him. Certainly in Gatsby we can see writ large the possible consequences of the Emersonian treatment of perfectibility.

James Gatz as a boy determined to perfect himself. At first, he set himself a fairly strenuous schedule:

Rise from bed . . . . . .6:00 A.M.
Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling. . . . . .6:15 - 6:30
Study electricity, etc. . . . . .7:15 - 8:15
Work . . . . . .8:30 - 4:30 P.M.
Baseball and sports . . . . . .4:30 - 5:00
Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it . . . . . 5:00 - 6:00
Study needed inventions . . . . . .7:00 - 9:00

GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafters. . .
No more smokeing [sic] or chewing
Bath every other day
Read one improving book or magazine per week
Save . . . $3.00 per week
Be better to parents [11]

Even without the perhaps unintended clues ("study electricity" and "Study needed inventions"), one thinks at once of Benjamin Franklin, who included in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* his much more arduous "scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day." Franklin, of course, rose at 5:00 a.m., not 6:00, and kept himself usefully employed until 1:00 a.m., not merely 9:00 p.m..[12] These are small differences,

and the way of thinking, the way of approaching oneself as a project, is identical: one's character and condition (both Emersonian terms) can be improved through sustained, systematic effort.

But when Benjamin Franklin set out to achieve "moral perfection," he recognized the "project" to be both "bold and arduous."[13] It is instructive to read his account of his failure to meet his own mark, and his subsequent (and humorous) rationalization:

> . . . something that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extream nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.[14]

Here we see Franklin, the supremely rational man, rationalizing. But Gatsby, unlike Franklin, is a post-Romantic character; when "arduous" self-improvement schemes fail, he has other means at his disposal. He soon finds this method of perfecting himself to be too slow; formal education proves equally disappointing:

> . . . he stayed there [at "the small Lutheran college of St. Olaf in Southern Minnesota"] for two weeks, dismayed at its ferocious indifference to the dreams of his destiny, to destiny itself. . . .[15]

And then, at seventeen, James Gatz simply recreates himself, turns his outer self into the fitting image of his inner self, and creates a Jay Gatsby consonant with the ambitions, desires and dreams of Jimmy Gatz:

> The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island,

> sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God -- a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that -- and he must be about his Father's business, the service of a vast, meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.[16]

Gatsby, the self-named and self-created, subsequently and (as I will argue later) consequently, functions on the edges of society, never engaging in any (other than mutually exploitive) form of dialectic with it. Gatsby's experience is essentially one of conversion, and a conversion experience in which the limitations of self are spontaneously transcended. Gatsby perfects himself and becomes unique by virtue of his magnificent (if foolish) dreams. He ceases to need, or to desire, the approval of the community, having circumvented its sanctioned means of self-improvement.

It is, obviously, a long way from John Winthrop, the exemplary governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to Jay Gatsby, social upstart and bootlegger. But Emerson, the figure I am proposing can be connected to both, suggests, in *The Divinity School Address* a way of viewing Christ that offers a half-way station between Winthrop's pure vision and Gatsby's dust-fouled wake:

> Alone in all history [Christ] estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World.

But, unlike Winthrop and like Fitzgerald, Emerson assures us that what Christ was, we can all become:

> A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made by the reception of beautiful sentiments.

> It is true that a great and rich soul, like his, falling among the simple, does so preponderate, that, as his did, it names the world. The world seems then to exist for him. . . .[17]

Until Jay Gatsby yokes his "unutterable visions" to Daisy's "perishable breath," his mind was, so Fitzgerald tells us, free to "romp. . .like the mind of God."[18] The simplistic, but enormously empowering, form of conversion described by Emerson in his notorious *Divinity School Address* and experienced by Jimmy Gatz in *The Great Gatsby*, would have sounded to Winthrop's ears as a dangerous, but not entirely unfamiliar, heresy, for, as we shall see later, uncontrolled formulations of the concept of the indwelling spirit plagued the Puritans in both the Old and New Worlds.

Obviously Emerson does not, in *The Divinity School Address*, exhort Harvard's graduating class of soon to be Unitarian ministers to become bootleggers, but he does urge them "to go alone" and to abjure "the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and [to] dare to love God without mediator or veil."[19] He offers his variously rapt and enraged audience nothing less than the possibility of perfection; more than possible, it is an obligation, and is to be had, not by study and long meditation, not by careful and disciplined imitation of good models, but by self-reliance merely. I will show later that what Emerson means by "self-reliance" is somewhat less simple than it here appears, although the appearance of simplicity is fully intended by Emerson, and is part of a rhetorical strategy that makes simplistic interpretations of Emerson fully possible. That aside, in *The Great Gatsby* we have a novel whose hero we are invited to admire ("Gatsby turned out all right in the end"[20]) for his self-reliance, for his willingness to "hitch [his] wagon to a star;" to "build . . . [his] own world."[21] Ultimately, it doesn't matter to Nick that Gatsby's star is (in any other sense than monetary) valueless, or that Gatsby is a criminal who demands that essentially innocent bystanders become characters in his dream. What finally matters to Nick is the *attempt*, the willingness to see beyond "the unreality of

reality" and to recognize "that the rock of the world [is] founded securely on a fairy's wing."[22] In the very Emersonian sense of being faithful to one's dream (regardless of the value of the dream) Gatsby is truly self-reliant, and it is precisely for this quality that Nick admires him.[23]

Gatsby's is clearly one of the available responses to the offers of power and perfection made by Emerson. But legitimate, and very unromantic, entrepreneurs have been known to hang Emersonian aphorisms behind their desks -- it isn't only the romantic criminal or the dreamer who find justification and inspiration in Emerson, and I intend to explore what it is in Emerson's ideas of perfectibility (especially as these have influenced his thought about the individual and culture) that can bring such diverse types together.

If, as an inspirational writer, Emerson speaks to disparate groups, as an object of scholarship he has inspired a remarkably harmonious chorus of veneration. Only a few have dared to criticize "the wisest American"[24]-- as both of Emerson's sharpest critics have noted. Yvor Winters, in "John Crowe Ranson or Thunder Without God," thus dismisses most of Emersonian scholarship:

> Now I respectfully submit that only a minute portion of what has been written on . . . Emerson . . . has any considerable value, and that a good deal of what has been written and very respectably published is unmitigated twaddle . . . .[25]

Winters continues by pinning this failure of scholars and critics on their indifference to two topics: the relationship between Emerson and his context and the relationship between Emerson and his followers. The latter complaint Winters develops into a strong objection to scholars who venerate Emerson without considering what might be the consequences of the practice of Emersonian doctrine. Fitzgerald has certainly offered us such a study, and certainly fiction, with its freedom to explore choices through the interplay of character and plot, may seem the best place for such exploration. But surely discursive prose can also be sufficiently flexible for thoughtful speculation. Quentin Anderson complains of a similar

failure on the part of scholars and critics (it is, I think, essentially a failure of critical imagination), warning that:

> Emerson, who is nowadays treated like a national monument and effectively ignored as a figure in cultural history, has to be looked at squarely if we are to understand how the process of shaking off our ties to others was first imagined.[26]

Part of the purpose and method of this dissertation is to take both Winters and Anderson seriously (an unfashionable enterprise), and I will return to both Winters and Anderson in subsequent chapters. Here, I will only outline their positions *vis a vis* Emerson. Winters discusses Emerson on very few occasions, most significantly in essays in which Emerson is connected to Jones Very ("Jones Very and R. W. Emerson: Aspects of New England Mysticism"), and to Hart Crane ("The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart Crane"). In the first of these essays, Winters dismisses Emerson as an insincere and self-indulgent dabbler in mysticism. He is even harder on Emerson in the essay on Hart Crane, claiming that

> Emerson was in no wise original, at least as regards the bare formulae of his thought: his ideas are the commonplace ideas of the romantic movement.

He argues that Emerson reinterprets such romantic commonplaces, leaving his readers with a doctrine of equivalence and impulse, and no option but to follow their whims.[27] Winters further proposes (in the most infamous and inflammatory sentence of the essay) that

> The doctrine of Emerson . . . , if really put into practice, should naturally lead to suicide: in the first place, if the impulses are indulged systematically and passionately, they can lead only to madness; in the second place, death, according to the doctrine, is not only a release from suffering but is also and inevitably the way to

> beatitude. There is no question, according to the doctrine, of moral preparation for salvation. . . .[28]

In the blandly cautious, timidly impersonal and monotonously proper world of criticism, Winters' ability to convince us that a passionate person is thinking and responding is invigorating, however infuriating.

Anderson is equally hard on Emerson, if less extreme in his expression:

> My thesis in this book [*The Imperial Self*] is that the American flight from culture, from the institutions and emotional dispositions of associated life, took on form in the work of Emerson, Whitman, and Henry James. . . .[29]

He argues that

> In Emerson, society was not spurned; it was judged irrelevant to human purposes in the measure that it forced or encouraged each of us to assume a distinct role. . . . The idea of community was dying in him and his fellows. . . . The individual consciousness must shoulder the burden [previously borne by the community -- of giving value, purpose and meaning --]. Secular incarnation . . . means being one's own redeemer, sitting at God's right hand *and* acting to some purpose in the world.[30]

Emerson, according to Anderson, can be connected to his "ancestors" (amongst whom Winthrop could be included) in that he

> . . . claimed no more for man than his ancestors had claimed for God, or, more precisely, he claimed that realized human greatness consists in a demand for the immediate realization of our wildest vision. This is neither to be omniscient nor omnipotent, but to say

> that our momentary sensations of omnipotence or omniscience tell us what we ought to become, what state is appropriate to us.[31]

The forces of desocialization that Anderson attributes to Emerson are clearly operative in Fitzgerald's treatment of Jay Gatsby; in Jay Gatsby's choice of life, and in Fitzgerald's novelistic exploration of the consequences of such a character having made such choices, we have, I believe, evidence of the validity of the charges laid by Winters and Anderson against Emerson.

Although, as I will show, it is true that both Winters and Anderson at times fail to read Emerson carefully, I believe that the thrust of their criticisms remains accurate, and that they deserve a more sympathetic reading than they are usually given. By engaging in a chronological and critical discussion of the concept and consequences of perfectibility in Emerson, I hope to provide a further basis for Winters' and Anderson's readings of Emerson. I will take into my account Nathaniel Hawthorne, a contemporary of Emerson who criticized Emerson through his fictions -- a writer who could consciously (as Fitzgerald does perhaps *un*consciously), deal in his fictions with the threats to society posed by the Emersonian concept of perfectionism. In this regard I will deal with selected works by Nathaniel Hawthorne that examine the weaknesses and dangers of Emerson's vision -- works which can, by virtue of the simple facts that fiction shows character in action and that plot can show the probable consequences of a character's choices, examine what might happen if Emerson's aphorisms were taken seriously, and acted upon. Thus I hope to further the suggestions of Winters and Anderson, but also to balance them and (to some extent) to correct them. This can be done, I believe, by placing these criticisms within a broader reading of Emerson's work and within an attempt to grasp the reasons for the stylistic, as well as philosophic, choices that make Emerson particularly vulnerable to attack. I intend to argue, further, that in the later work *English Traits* we find a more balanced, reasonable Emerson than in the earlier, and better known, works.[32] I will

attempt to connect the ideas of *English Traits* with the cultural criticisms made by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *On the Constitution of Church and State* and Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*. Both of these works offer visions of perfectibility which I will compare with Emerson's. With the exception of this one work, *English Traits*, however, I will be stressing what I believe to be the *continuity* of Emerson's thought.

In seeing Emerson's career as one of almost unimpeded continuity rather than one of discontinuity I am, to a certain extent, finding common ground with such other current readers of Emerson as David Robinson in *Apostle of Culture* and Julie Ellison in *Emerson's Romantic Style*, both of whom emphasize the continuous development of Emerson's thought. This is not, of course, the traditional way to read Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, as the American preacher of self-reliance and non-conformity, would probably be neither pleased nor very surprized at the conformity of opinion that has, until very recently, existed among scholars regarding his development. His life has generally been understood to have had, like a Victorian triple decker, a three-part structure, and until recently, we have read, or not read, as our taste permits, Emerson in these terms. As we have all been taught, Emerson was first a minister, one whose sermons have, until the last few years, remained for the most part unpublished and regarded as not worthy of study. "Volume I" of the "novel" has thus remained unread. Again, until recently, it has been agreed that the minister underwent a crisis which, in 1832, ended the first phase and began the second: that of Emerson the lecturer and, subsequently and more significantly, the essayist. This is seen as the period of Emerson's most optimistic transcendentalism; it is traditionally thought to have been followed by a revisionist phase, a period of increased skepticism and maturity, heralded by the publication of "Experience" in *Essays Second Series* and continued in *Representative Men* by the essay on Montaigne. The final phase, "Volume III," is, like "Volume I," ignored. It drags on until Emerson's death in 1882 and is characterized (so the authorized version goes) by honourable repetitions in more coherent and less "unsettling"[33] terms of the

concepts developed in the 1830s -- self-reliance, compensation, the over-soul, correspondence and the non-existence of evil. Although Stephen Whicher, in *Freedom and Fate* ,was the first to provide a table with dates[34] charting this development, in a rougher form these periods have been more or less agreed upon since the time of Emerson's death.

Current scholarship is, however, attempting to revise Whicher's enormously influential reading of Emerson as a writer whose ideas underwent significant revisions at certain crisis points in his life. Ellison, for example, argues that self doubt, fate and skepticism were perpetually a part of Emerson:

> In fact, these anxieties never leave his consciousness for more than a few pages at a time, even in his earliest literary experiments. . . . Close readings of Emerson's prose will, I hope, bear out the hypothesis that, while the tone and arrangement of moods of "freedom" and "fate" [the contrasted terms are, of course, Whicher's] change somewhat over the course of Emerson's career, the conflict between them is there from the start.[35]

And David Robinson has also, both in *Apostle of Culture* and in his "Introduction" to the first volume of the *Collected Sermons* focussed attention on what connects the sermon writer to the lecturer and the essayist; Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism* has, by virtue of its broad concerns, also shown us ways of connecting the Unitarianism of the sermons to the full-blown transcendentalism of the essays. We can point, too, to Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature* in which he, like Ellison, claims that Emerson's "skepticism . . . was always implicit in his vision of life."[36] My discussion of Emerson will be based on a similar conviction that although Emerson certainly developed and changed, he did not do so exclusively or even primarily at certain crisis points. We will see that perfectibility concerned Emerson from the beginning to the end of his career. But before we can begin to discuss what it meant to Emerson, we need to establish what is

meant by the term, and to establish in what ways it is distinct from another, related concept: progress. Perfectibility doesn't seem, and for the most part isn't, a difficult concept; certainly it exists in our common language as a casually recognizable idea.

In 1827, Emerson, at the age of twenty-four, wrote to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson that "Every man is a new creation: can do something best."[37] It is a pleasant idea, until, perhaps, we realize that thus formulated, nothing is excluded: one's "best" could include expertise in such arts as forgery, embezzlement, and so on. In *The Perfectibility of Man* , John Passmore argues that such confusion ought never to occur, because "[w]hen moralists, theologians, philosophers dispute about whether a man is 'perfectible,' they take it for granted that the perfection in question does not include perfection in vice. Nor is "[t]o be perfectible in a task [as a carpenter, a painter, and so on] . . . the same thing as being perfectible as a man." "To be perfectible in a task" is "technical perfection."[38] There are, however, other types of perfectibility isolated by Passmore; these are teleological perfection (as described by Passmore and formulated by Aristotle, this consists in finding "the perfection which consists in a thing's reaching its 'natural end'"[39]) and "obedientiary perfection" (finding perfection by submitting one's self to an ideal[40]). Further to these distinctions, Passmore offers eight ways of viewing perfectibility:

(1) there is some task in which each and every man can perfect himself technically;

(2) he is capable of wholly subordinating himself to God's will;

(3) he can attain to his natural end;

(4) he can be entirely free of any moral defect;

(5) he can make of himself a being who is metaphysically perfect;

(6) he can make of himself a being who is harmonious and

orderly;

(7) he can live in the manner of an ideally perfect human being;

(8) he can become godlike.[41]

As we shall see, the Unitarians argued for the seventh of these possibilities; Emerson adopted the most radical formulation, that the individual can become, not merely godlike, but a god. This vision of the most extreme form of perfectibility being available to each individual sufficently self-reliant to accept it we will see developing in Emerson's thought from his sermons, his lectures, and into his essays. It is a heady concept, and one that could both inspire the highest and the most reckless forms of behaviour; I will argue that in Emerson's hands the notion is removed from all conventional or orthodox systems that would restrain or limit its application, and that persons hearing his call to "a perfection which has no type yet in the universe"[42]

The concept of perfectibility is an ancient one. Plato, in *The Republic*, argues that through submission to a perfect ideal, perfectibility can be achieved.[43] Aristotle brings the discussion into the realm of the actual by locating his treatment of the problem in a discourse on, not the ideal state, but ethics. In *The Nicomachean Ethics* he opposes Plato's conception of the One Ideal, arguing instead for a definition of the "final good" which he determines to be happiness, or "that which, taken by itself, makes life desirable, and wholly free from want."[44] This he finally connects to "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue . . . . in a complete life."[45] Such happiness Aristotle thinks of as "the result of virtue and of learning of discipline of some kind"[46] or a divine gift. But regardless, it consists in *activity* .[47] Thus, it is a form of perfectibility that occurs within a social context, and pertains primarily to the life of the individual *within* the state.

Plotinus developed some of Plato's ideas on the subject of perfectibility in ways that served to make them particularly accessible to subsequent Christian thinkers, arguing that the soul consists of two parts, an upper and a lower. It is the task of the

individual to achieve identification with his upper soul and thus to accomplish a reconnection with "the One."[48] What "the One" is, is nearly impossible to grasp; however, Plotinus does tell us that in union with "the One" we are no longer "discordant." Although, as Passmore points out, Plotinus's ideas are antithetical to the Christian conception of God (there is no redemptive quality to the relationship between the lower soul and the upper soul's ascension to union with "the One"; sin is transcended rather than forgiven[49]), the idea of the contemplative ascent to union with an ever-over-flowing perfection has remained a powerful concept in Christian thought.

Broadly speaking, there are two Christian responses to the possibility of perfectibility. Neither denies that Christ said to his followers: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), but one group (the orthodox) has argued that man's fallen nature makes perfectibility impossible; the other, composed of Christian mystics, that perfectibility is possible. Amongst the orthodox are Augustine, who envisioned two incompatible cities, one of God (perfect) and one of man (incapable of perfection). And certainly in this regard, the theologians of the Reformation make common cause with the orthodox. However, within the Church, Aquinas, for example, has argued that in an intellectual vision of God, the fallen soul can achieve happiness. *Perfect* happiness, however, can be had only with death:

> A certain participation of Happiness can be had in this life [through "phantasms"], but perfect and true Happiness cannot be had in this life .... For since happiness is a perfect and sufficient good, it excludes every evil .... But in this life every evil cannot be excluded.[50]

Mystics within the Christian church gathered together various texts (most of which are now referred to as "hard sayings of the New Testament") as "'counsels of perfection;' these texts were read as laying down a path which Christians could follow to perfection, the path of poverty, chastity and self-abnegation."[51] Thus, through self-denial, asceticism

and contemplation, a state of perfect union with God can be had. But such an achievement is bound by its nature to be temporary, to be concentrated in moments of illumination, and, significantly, to be found only in withdrawal from community. Whether the mystic can return to community, can live in some sort of mutually beneficial connection to his society depends largely on the motives and framework of his mysticism. Gatsby's visions, both in their pure (pre-Daisy) and adulterated (wedded to Daisy, helplessly unable to equal Gatsby's vision of her) are finally self-created and self-centred; he neither achieves nor seeks any meaningful intercourse with his society. I believe this to be consequent upon certain specifically Emersonian aspects of Gatsby's self-reliant perfectibility.

In the next chapters I will discuss the place of perfectibility in the thought of the Puritans and their odd descendants, the Unitarians; first, however, I would like to conclude this chapter by contrasting perfectibility with the fairly modern concept of progress, and with the ancient belief in millennialism. Both of these faiths were significant in the intellectual and spiritual life of Emerson's contemporaries; both can be (but are not necessarily) connected to perfectibility. J. B. Bury, in *The Idea of Progress* makes a sharp distinction between millennialism (the belief, regardless of its details, that the Messiah will return to establish his kingdom on earth) and the secular doctrine of progress. Bury makes a further, albeit slight, distinction between progress and perfectibility. Whether social or moral, he argues that perfectibility is simply an extension of progress, a "further hypothesis. . . which rests on much less impressive evidence."[52] Belief in progress demands faith; belief in perfectibility simply requires *more* faith. But there are, I think, more significant distinctions to be made. Although both Plato and Augustine could imagine a perfect republic or a perfect city, neither could conceive of continuous progress or entertain the notion that over time, mankind could improve in both nature and condition. As Bury himself points out, a belief in progress requires an optimistic view of history and human nature. Lockean sensationalism provided a sound theoretic basis for the belief that alterations in social conditions could result in better people: if society improved, if the

stimuli responsible for human behaviour were altered, progress must occur. It is through effort that progress occurs; only the millennialist can wait for an apocalyptic crisis that will result in the establishment of a perfected state.

Millennialism has existed since the second century B. C., when the exiled Israelites were promised that a Messiah would rise up to save them and to re-establish the kingdom of God's chosen people on earth.[53]

To the Christian, of course, the Messiah has already come, and the *return* of the Christ will signa the beginning of the millennia. As Ernest Tuveson, in *Millennium and Utopia,* points out, those who emphasize this aspect of Christian thought interpret history in terms of its indications of the nearness and inevitability of Christ's return. In *Redeemer Nation* , Tuveson shows the importan of this view of history to the Puritans and to subsequent generations of Americans. Certainly the millennial view of history as a drama moving towards a climactic conclusion dominates the early records of the Puritans: they believed themselves to be establishing the "New Jerusalem" in the New World, and that when Christ returned, it would be in this New World that he would establi his earthly kingdom. Their optimism was tempered, however, by their Calvinism. As I hope to show in my next chapter, their view of human nature was such that they had no sense that their efforts could secure the establishment of the millennium. That heady optimism, that excess of "romantic readiness"[54] didn't infect significant numbers of Americans until, in the nineteenth century, the secular concept of progress became connected to the religious faith in millennialism. During that century, according to Tuveson, the notion of the inevitability of progress was adopte by many millennialists, and "the millennialist interpretation of God's Word did much to shape attitudes toward contemporary problems."[55] Such interpreters began to adopt the confidence of secular progressivists. They differed from orthodox millennialists in their conviction that reform of secular institutions could bring about the millennium,[56] and their confidence that the millenniu could be achieved without violence. As Calvinism gave way to milder versions of Christianity, millennial thinkers transferred belief in innate depravity to belief in ignorance -- which is, one hopes and they believed, correctable. Ralph Waldo Emerson doesn't fit easily into any of these

groups. He was neither a millennialist nor a reformer, but, in his most popular and influential works, a firm believer in the perfectibility of the individual who could yield his will to the power his soul. Distinctive as Emerson's ideas are, they have a genealogy, and I propose to turn now t his intellectual progenitors, the Puritans. From them (as from the Unitarians) Emerson inherited the moral rectitude for which he is famous. But there are larger and more significant connection and to these I wish to direct our attention.

[1] James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics," *The Writings of James Russell Lowell*, 11 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1898) 3: 39.

[2] Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) 4.

[3]John Winthrop, *Christian Charity A Model Hereof.* Massachusetts Historical Society. *The Puritan Tradition in America 1620 - 1730* , ed. Alden T. Vaughan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 140.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982) 16.

[5] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980) 182.

[6]Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 60.

[7] Poirier 61.

[8] Poirier 51.

[9] Poirier 69.

[10] Fitzgerald 41.

[11] Fitzgerald 174.

[12] Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and Selections from His Other Writings*, ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: The Modern Library 1950) 98 - 99.

[13] Franklin 92.

[14]Franklin 100 - 101.

[15] Fitzgerald 100.

[16] Fitzgerald 99.

[17] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, *Emerson's Complete Works*, ed. J. E. Cabot, The Riverside Edition, 11 vols. (1838; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1886) 1: 131.

[18] Fitzgerald 112.

[19] Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, *Works* 1: 143.

[20] Fitzgerald 2.

[21] Emerson, *Nature* 1: 79.

[22] Fitzgerald 100.

[23] John Fraser, in "Dust and Dreams and *The Great Gatsby*," discusses the nature of Gatsby's dream; he introduces his discussion with these comments:

> *The Great Gatsby* is especially concerned with the relationship between ideals and conduct, and its thesis on this subject . . . is approximately as follows: to have large romantic ideals is almost certainly to be mistaken, because of the nature of ideals, but to attempt to do without them is to live emptily and to thwart a permanent human craving; hence almost any large romantic ideals, however mistaken, deserve to be viewed respectfully.

While I agree with Fraser's conclusion regarding the "insufficiency in the way in which ideals have often operated in the American consciousness," I believe Fitzgerald's characters to be merely later symptoms of a problem in American culture that began in Emerson's time. (John Fraser, "Dust, Dreams and *The Great Gatsby* ," *The Name of Action: Critical Essays* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984] 31 and 40.)

[24] The phrase is taken from the title of the biography by Phillips Russell. (*Emerson: The Wisest American* [Norwood, Mass.: Plimpton Press, 1929].)

[25] Yvor Winters, *The Anatomy of Nonsense, In Defense of Reason*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1947) 566.

[26] Yvor Winters, "The Significance of *THE BRIDGE* by Hart Crane, or What are We to Think of Professor X?" *In Defense of Reason* , 3rd ed. (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1947) 590.

[27] Anderson 5.

[28] Winters 578.

[29] Anderson 3.

[30] Anderson 5.

[31] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Divinity School Address* , *Works* 1: 131.

[32] H. B. Parkes, in "Emerson," writes that "[w]ith the exception of 'English Traits' nearly everything that Emerson wrote was an embroidering of a few very simple ideas," but that "[w]hen he applied himself to observation, he was always admirable (his best book is probably 'English Traits')." *Traits* is, however, one of Emerson's most ignored books; it has had no influence and, being atypical, offers little support for critics desiring to apply a theory to the body of Emerson's work. (H. B. Parkes, *The Pragmatic Test: Essays on the History of Ideas* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970) 47 and 61.

[33] It was, of course, Emerson's announced intention (in "Circles," *Essays First Series*) to "unsettle all things" (2: 318).

[34] Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953) xvi. It should be noted that Whicher is somewhat diffident in his approach to his chart; he writes "Perhaps a table, vague as it must be, will be of use . . . ."

[35] Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 5.

[36] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, (New York: Random House, 1987) 35.

[37] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820 - 1872*, eds. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1909) 2: 214.

[38] John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 12-13.

[39] Passmore 16.

[40] Passmore 14 - 15.

[41] Passmore 27.

[42] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 3 vols. (n.p. University of Missouri Press, 1989) 2: 265.

[43] Passmore 25. Passmore comments on Plato's ideal state in terms that clarify the distinction between the Yankee and the original Greek:

> . . . Plato defines the perfection of that ideal State, by reference to whose perfection the perfection of its individual citizens is to be determined. The ideal State is harmonious, orderly, stable, unified; the ideal citizen, by performing the tasks allotted to him, contributes to the total social harmony.

This is so very distinct from Emerson's thought as almost to require no comment. When Emerson thought of perfectibility, it was never as a *citizen*; rather it was as an individual functioning in such a way as to perpetuate (to deify) his individuality.

[44] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* , *The Ethics of Aristotle* , ed. tran. J. E. C. Welldon (London: MacMillan, 1902) 14.

[45] Aristotle 16.

[46] Aristotle 20.

[47] Aristotle 19.

[48] Passmore 63 - 37.

[49]Passmore 65.

[50] Thomas Aquinas, *A Summa of the Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologica edited and explained for beginners* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 394.

[51] Passmore 117.

[52] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955) 4.

[53] Olson, Theodore, *Millennialism, utopianism, and progress* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 16, 18 - 34.

[54] Fitzgerald 2.

[55] Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The U of Chicago Press, 1968) 53.

[56] Tuveson 54 - 55, 58 - 59.

Chapter Two
The Puritan Background

In 1654, Edward Johnson, in *Wonder Working Providence of Sion's Savior* , declared with confidence (and something approaching enthusiasm) that the new world "is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven and a new Earth. . . , new Churches and a new Commonwealth together."[1] Frederic Carpenter uses this passage, almost three hundred years later, at the beginning of *American Literature and the Dream* as the first of what he claims are other expressions of "the millennial hope of an ideal world" as

> . . . the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, Emerson's address to "The American Scholar" and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* , the wisdom of Lincoln and the idealism of Woodrow Wilson. . . .[2]

Retrospectively, it is of course possible to see such connections -- or to imagine them. In this chapter I intend to examine the sense in which the Puritans, who gave their descendents the first means of understanding and expressing what it was to be citizens of a "new world," were perfectionists or millennialists. I will argue that, in spite of the presence and importance of such seemingly ecstatic utterances as that of Edward Johnson, the Puritans' vision of their new land and their grasp of what was possible for themselves in it were, for the most part, restrained by a sober sense of reality. In the second part of the chapter, I will examine the relationship of the Unitarians to the Puritans with regard to these issues. Connected with this are the differing notions of psychology and rhetoric that informed the religious thought (and its expression in sermons) of both the Puritans and the Unitarians. Although Emerson developed within Unitarian schools and churches, both traditions were available to him, and an understanding of both must precede an examination of Emerson. The Unitarian model of psychology and rhetoric developed in large part in reaction against the Puritan way; it is virtually impossible to understand the Unitarians, or,

subsequently, the Transcendentalists, without first coming to terms with what the Puritans were doing.

One of the first governors of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford, described the arrival of the settlers in the new world in the following passage, taken from his *History of Plymouth Plantation 1606 - 1646* :

> . . . for the season it was winter, and they that know
> the winters of that cuntrie know them to be sharp and
> violent, and subjecte to cruelle and feirce storms . . . .
> Besides, what could they see but a hidious and desolate
> wildernes, full of wild beasts and willd men . . . . Neither
> could they, as it were, goe up to the tope of Pisgah, to vew
> from this willdernes a more goodly cuntrie to feed their
> hops; for which way soever they turnd their eys (save
> upward to the heavens) they could have litle solace or
> content in respecte of any outward objects. If they looked
> behind them, ther was the mighty ocean which they
> had passed, and was now as a maine barr
> goulfe to seperate them from all the civill parts of the world.[3]

The prospects of these searchers for a new land are uniformly grim, with one exception: "save upwards to the heavens" -- and indeed, once Bradford focusses on that vertical plane, once he moves from detailed observation of the realities of life to a contemplation of God's greatness, he turns from grim narrative to triumphant quotation:

> 'Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord,
> shew how He hath delivered them from the hand of
> the oppressour. When they wandered in the desolate
> willdernes out of the way, and found no citie to dwell
> in, both hungrie and thirstie, their sowle was overwhelmed

in them. Let them confess before the Lord his lovingkindness
and his wonderful works before the sons of men.'[4]

This double vision -- realistic and transcendent -- leads directly to the question I want to address in this chapter: what exactly did the Puritans hope to achieve *in* this cruel world, and what did their beliefs in redemption and new life mean to them, as they struggled to establish church and society in the midst of this inhospitable wilderness, populated, as Bradford says, by "savage barbarians" who were "readier to fill [our] sides full of arrows than otherwise."[5] To discover just how perfectible the majority of the Puritans believed themselves and their society to be, we need to look at their theological reasons for leaving England, and at the sort of society they hoped to establish in the new world. Their attitudes to learning, their choice of rhetorical strategies to express the plan of salvation developed in their sermons, and their response, in the late 1630s, to the antinomian crisis all reveal what the Puritans believed mankind to be. This may appear to be taking us a long way from Emerson. However, I intend to establish that a significant part of Emerson's rhetorical strategies and philosophical approaches are best understood by recognizing the depth of his connections with his Puritan forebears. It is popular at the present time to emphasize the importance of Emerson's connections with the Unitarians, and certainly these are considerable. However, Emerson also admired and yearned for the heat of Puritan piety, and sought to transcend, among other things, what he considered the deadly rationalism of the Unitarians. Thus I will examine both Puritan and Unitarian concepts of piety and perfectibility, what each group believed possible for themselves in the new world, and the ways they chose to express their beliefs. Only with this background (and it is of genuine interest and significance in itself) can we hope to get a grip on that rather slippery New Englander, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Puritans left England in 1630 when they were convinced that their demands for reform of the Anglican church would never be met. The English Reformation failed to be as far-reaching in its effects as that begun by Luther (from rather loftier

motives) in Wittenburg in 1517. By the time of the Elizabethan Settlement and Act of Uniformity (1559), a cautious "middle way" between popery and protestantism had been established, to the disappointment of the more radical of the reformers. This isn't to say that the men and women who finally left England had constituted the lunatic fringe of the English Protestant reformers; they hadn't. For the most part, as Perry Miller makes clear on numerous occasions, "Puritanism was a movement toward certain ends *within* the culture and the state of England in the late sixteenth century."[6] What Miller is emphasizing is that the Puritans were, for the most part, typical Englishmen and women of their time. Theologically, as well, they were to a significant degree, orthodox: their vision of man as essentially corrupt, as requiring prevenient grace for salvation (and not a simple exertion of the will) was acceptable doctrine to such Anglicans as John Donne:

> Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?
> Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
> I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
> And all my pleasures are like yesterday.
> I dare not move my dimme eyes any way,
> Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
> Such terrour, and my feebled flesh doth waste
> By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doth weigh;
> Only thou art above, and when towards thee
> By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe;
> But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
> That not one houre I can my selfe sustaine;
> Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art
> And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.[7]

As "Holy Sonnet 1" makes obvious, Arminianism was not a point of dispute between Anglican and Puritan: Donne expresses correct orthodox (and Calvinist) opinion here in his

recognition of the utter helplessness of the sinful nature. Only by God's free gift of prevenient grace can the devil's "art" be "prevented." There is no question here that any action on the part of the sinner can assist in his salvation.

As Perry Miller makes abundantly clear, the Puritans were also in full agreement with their Anglican opponents on questions of what they both stigmatized as "enthusiasm," the belief held by the most extreme reformers that they had received "special divine communications" (*SOED*). Stow Persons thus describes the Quakers, a sect equally loathed by Anglican in England and Puritan in New England:

> Perhaps the most radical feature of early Quaker teaching was its perfectionism. While he was in full agreement with the Puritan that man in the unregenerate state is spiritually, mentally, and morally depraved, the Quaker nevertheless believed that, if man would but subject himself without reserve to the prompting of the light within, he would be perfectly regenerated. Many of the earliest Quakers thought to testify to their faith in God's infinite grace and power by insisting that such perfection in the fullest sense was the instantaneous result of the gift of grace.[8]

While the Puritans obviously left England in order to worship as they pleased, they did *not* come to New England to enable others to do so, as their prosecution of Quakers and other antinomians such as Mistress Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams makes abundantly obvious. Roger Williams, who arrived in Plymouth with the full acceptance of the community,[9] soon began to express unpalatable doctrines. In *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* , he began a debate with the spokesman of Puritan orthodoxy, John Cotton. To Williams' plea for tolerance, Cotton replied (in *The Bloudy Tenent, washed, And made White in the bloud of the Lambe* [1647]:

> It is not lawfull to persecute any, till after *admonition* once or twice . . . [Then, because in] *fundamentall* and principall points of Doctrine or Worship, the Word of *God* in such things is so cleare, that hee cannot but bee convinced in *conscience* of the dangerous Error of his way, after once or twice *Admonition* . . . And then if any one persist it is not out of *Conscience*, but against *his* Conscience . . . . He is not *persecuted* for Cause of *conscience*, but for sinning *against* his Owne *Conscience*..[10]

The debate, as this passage shows, was based on a complete inability of either side to see the other's point of view; the certainty with which Cotton defends a position that is, to us, utterly untenable, is similar to the confidence with which Andrews Norton attacked Emerson in the miracles debate of the 1830s. Emerson, unlike Williams, was politely bemused by the attacks, and declined to reply. The difference may have been motivated solely by temperament; I will suggest that it also came from Emerson's cheerful ignorance of and indifference to the consequences that should be the result of a wholesale acceptance of his ideas.

Our focus here, however, is the Puritans, and Cotton's attitude to Williams's desire for religious tolerance (one with which, of course, we are culturally bound to sympathize), may well seem simply to affirm the cartoonist's image of the Puritan as the un- or semi-educated bigot, grim-faced and dressed in unrelieved black. In fact, though, like the Anglicans they opposed, the Puritan leaders were highly educated humanists. Undeniably, they placed an extraordinary emphasis on the *spoken* (as opposed to the written) word. To the Puritan, the sermon replaced the sacraments as the means chosen by God of conveying his grace to his listening people. Lawrence Sasek has shown in *The Literary Temper of the English Puritans* the extent of the importance the Puritans placed on the spoken word.

Texts such as Romans 10:17 were popular justifications: "faith comes by hearing."[11] But the verse goes on to say "and hearing by the word of God." That is to say, faith comes by hearing the Scriptures, the written word of God, and, as we shall see, this conviction informed both the Puritans' theological position and their approach to sacred rhetoric. But it must not be forgotten that the leaders of the movement were highly educated, and knew far more than just their Bibles. Their humane learning informs their sermons, and a scant six years after establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1636, the Puritans founded Harvard College, to ensure their leadership by a learned clergy. They established, it is true, a theocracy in the new world, but we should remember that it was also intended to be led by the most humane, learned and godly of its members. As such, the clergy was intended to function in a manner similar to that of the clerisy envisioned by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, two hundred years later, or by the cultured class that Matthew Arnold yearned to see guiding England in the later nineteenth century.

It wasn't their attitude to learning, then, that separated the Puritans from the Anglicans. Rather, it was the reformers' insistence on the primacy of the Scriptures. The Anglican view of the Bible was sophisticated (sophistical, a Puritan might say): they "could not," as Miller describes it,

> imagine that everything in the Bible, every incidental
> history, every minute circumstance, was intended by God
> to be universally and literally binding on all men.

To the Anglican, the Bible provided a place where "the fundamental and comprehensive truths of religion might be set down",[12] but *not* a place where one could or should go to discover rules and advice on either the trivia of daily living or the details of church organization. Christian, in *The Pilgrim's Progress* , begins his dangerous journey to faith by opening and *reading* a book. The written word, the spoken word, the word of God: the Puritan sought for God's instruction in these places. Anything not specifically directed in scripture was suspect. To the purist (to the Puritan) much of what constituted the

Anglican church, from vestments to vespers, smacked of popery. And this insistence on the primacy of scripture had implications for sermonizing -- for example, the most immediate difference between Puritan and Anglican sermons is the often stunning proliferation of scriptural references in the former. The text is central to a Puritan sermon. Not only are both doctrine and application or uses based on it, but its meaning is expanded and clarified through the inclusion of countless other scriptures.

The Puritans were, of course, Calvinists, and shared with Calvin belief in original sin, predestination and election, but, in their zeal to prove that the word of God provides a plausible rationale for the establishment of a church and state pleasing to His sight (and different from that existing in England), they went beyond Calvin and found in scripture a rationale for a congregational and societal order they subsequently sought to establish in the new world. From the great Cambridge theologian William Perkins (whose *The Arte of Prophesying* became their style manual), the New England divines derived a central concept -- the idea that even a small amount of faith "is sufficient to be accounted the work of God's righteousness."[13] This, as Miller argues in "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," became the starting point of Puritan covenant theology (a theological system based on the idea that God has established a series of covenants with man, and that if man fulfills his part of the covenant, God will respond with His). In this particular covenant, God promises to reward a little faith with sufficient grace to enable more faith, and so on. But as Eugene White points out, it still remains the case that only God can supply the means of meeting his own conditions. Covenant theology can limit God's awfulness; it cannot remove it completely.[14] But it *does* limit it, and provides an early example of a rational compromise between mystery and pragmatism. The following is taken from a sermon given by Peter Bulkeley, one of the most liberal of the New England divines:

> Oh the depth of Gods grace herein, that when
> sinfull man deserves never to have the least
> good word from him, that he should open his

> whole heart and purpose to him, in a Covenant;
> that when he deserves nothing else but separation
> from God, and to be driven up and downe the
> world, as a Vagabond, or as dryed leaves, fallen
> from our God, that yet the Almighty God cannot
> be content with it, but must make himselfe to
> us, and us to himselfe more sure and neer than
> ever before![15]

The terrifying arbitrariness of God is tempered; He is made reasonable and His power bound and limited. It was an extraordinary coup: the Puritan could inhabit the awesome and terrifying universe of Calvinist theology with the comforting assurance of some degree of control.

In the particular aspects of their theology of interest to us, their approach to perfectibility and beliefs about millennialism, the Puritans functioned for the most part within an orthodox tradition. They had, undoubtedly, high hopes for their "citie upon a hill," but these were consistently tempered by the realities of the wilderness and by the orthodoxy of their doctrine. The ecstatic conviction of the Quakers that complete perfection was the simultaneous result of the extension of God's grace was truly foreign to them; more typical is Anne Bradstreet's [Longing for Heaven], in which she expresses the weary soul's yearning for the fulfillment that can come only with death:

> Oh how I long to be at rest
> and soare on high among the blest . . . .
> And when a few yeares shall be gone
> this mortall shall be cloth'd upon
> A Corrupt Carcasse downe it lyes
> a glorious body it shall rise
> In weaknes and dishonour sowne

in power 'tis rais'd by Christ alone

Then soule and body shall unite

and of their maker have the sight [.][16]

Only in death can the redeemed soul hope to know perfect fulfillment. This doctrine accords with Luther's teaching, which is also, at least on this point, consistent with Catholic orthodoxy. In his 1519 sermon, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," Luther describes the "alien righteousness" that is instilled in us by the unmerited grace of God. This righteousness, the only kind that can redeem the sinner,

> is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.[17]

Only with the death of their corrupt bodies can the elect begin to live the life for which they have been preparing. Similarly, Calvin (in *Institutes III*), describes the appropriate Christian response to death:

> For if we deem this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle of our body to be so dissolved that it is soon renewed into a firm, perfect, incorruptible, and finally, heavenly glory, will not faith compel us ardently to seek what nature dreads? If we should think that through death we are recalled from exile to dwell in the fatherland, in the heavenly fatherland, would we get no comfort from this fact?[18]

Life for the redeemed is a preparation, a process of *becoming* perfected, but such fulfillment is not possible for the soul trapped in "this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle."

As John Passmore points out in *The Perfectibility of Mankind*, the Calvinist position on perfectibility accorded with that expressed by Christian orthodoxy since the Council of Orange (529) sided with Augustine's position on the perfectibility of the redeemed.[19] In *The City of God* Augustine denies the possibility (to millennialists, the certainty) of the earthly establishment of a "city of God." This perfected community can only exist, for Augustine, in Heaven. What can exist on earth is a sort of "shadow city," a communion of the saints, those who love God and who will become citizens of the true City of God. In orthodox Christianity, perfection cannot be had in this life; on earth it is only possible that the Christian should, with the constant assistance of efficacious grace, be enabled to begin a walk towards the perfected life that will be his upon death. As John Bunyan, a writer popular with the Puritans, describes it in the "Conclusion" of *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* :

> I can do none of those things which commands me,
> but my corruptions will thrust in themselves; When
> I would do good, evil is present with me.
>
> These things I continuallie see and feel, and
> am afflicted and oppressed with; yet the Wisdom of
> God doth order them for my good: . . . . [They]
> provoke me to look to God thorow Christ to help me,
> and carry me thorow this world.[20]

Only in the realm of the dream can the pilgrim hope to complete his progress through this corrupt world to the Celestial City without experiencing corporeal death. The full title of Bunyan's most popular book sums up what is possible within the orthodox position: *The*

Pilgrim's Progress from this World to that Which Is to Come, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream .

Within both Catholic and Protestant communions, however, mystical and pietistic groups sought to achieve the very union with God declared impossible on earth by the orthodox. John Passmore explains:

> . . . the idea of a perfect society composed of perfect men, a society existing here on this earth as distinct from a kingdom of heaven, entered into Christian thought in two ways. First as millenialism, the belief in a Second Coming -- presaged by calamities and the emergence of anti-Christ on earth -- after which Christ will reign on earth over a kingdom of saints. Secondly, as the idea of a City of God composed of men who are already perfected and living on earth in a perfect community in the midst of a secular state to which they owe little or no obedience. The two ideas were often conjoined; the saints, it is then suggested, were to live now in a city of God in preparation for Christ's second coming.[21]

The Puritans arrived in the new world determined to establish a godly community, to be an example to the world they had left, of a society founded on biblical principles. By Ernest Tuveson's definition, they were "millenialist," for theirs was indeed "the belief that history, under divine guidance, will bring about the triumph of Christian principles, and that a holy utopia will come into being."[22] Certainly the Puritan view of their history was influenced by such a conviction of the importance of their experiment. However, the Puritans remained at the same time thorough-going realists, well aware that the saints had to co-exist in community with the reprobates. The impulse to inclusion inherent in covenant theology eventually led to the establishment of the Half-way Covenant (in 1662), which instituted

the means by which persons who had not yet experienced full conversion could be brought into church membership. Such an impulse to compromise is clearly impossible to those seeking to establish a completely perfected community, separate from the necessities brought about by life in a mixed society. That isn't to say that the Puritans early and easily tolerated dissent. They did not, especially dissent that took the form of an argument for individual religious autonomy -- the needs of community took precedence over any individual's desire to serve God in his or her own way. However, they were developing a model for a society in which unbelievers could function, although admittedly still with only limited powers.

John Cotton, in a sermon published in 1641, "Christian Calling," exemplifies the combination of this- and other-worldliness that characterized the Puritan approach:

> . . .Faith drawes the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling; as soone as ever a man begins to looke towards God, and the wayes of his grace, he will not rest, till he find some warrantable Calling and imployment. . . . A Christian would no sooner have his sinne pardoned, then his estate to be setled in some good calling, though not as a mercenary slave, but he would offer it up to God as a free-will offering, he would have his condition and heart setled in Gods peace, but his Life setled in a good calling, though it be but of a day-labourer, yet make me one as may doe thee service. . . . [23]

This is at once pietistic (the notion of one's work being a vocation owed to God) and practically moralistic in that Cotton demands that the saints "setle" themselves in some useful career -- always remembering that the chosen career must enable the saint to develop

the gifts with which he has been endowed by God. (The importance this gives to one's choice of calling we will see tormenting Emerson almost two hundred years later[24]). The Christian must live, work, and thrive *in* the world. The millenarian view of their history evident in such texts as Edward Johnson's *Wonder Working Providence of Sion's Savior* and the ardent piety of the Puritans existed in tension with their practical, commonsensical morality (and again, one may well think ahead to Emerson's ability to unite the roles of shrew Yankee manager with orphic soothsayer).

The Puritan's interest in millennial matters was deep but peripheral. Harry Stout, in *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* has clearly established the limited extent to which the Puritan preachers engaged in public discussions of millennialism:

> Christians in all ages were commanded to look for Christ's return, but they must not presume to know exactly when that moment might come. Millennial predictions based on biblical prophecies were admittedly speculative, and ministers rarely engaged in any precise dating or extended discussion of the millennium in their regular preaching. In his meditations, Thomas Shepard concluded that "a man that is bold to prophesy infallibly assisted as in former times, because it secretly steams away the hearts of men to rest upon the fancy of a man and so fall off from resting upon the word."[25]

The idea of perfectibility in this life was abhorrent to Puritan thought, to the extent that those (mis)guided by their inner lights to imagine that they could commune directly with God on earth were whipped, banished, and even hanged. Millennialism was more attractive, but it too was heady stuff, and remained under firm controls, usually dealt with

in Thursday lectures (and not in the more canonical Sabbath sermons), and with clear-sighted recognition of what could be known and what must remain unknown. And in the meantime, the Puritan lived firmly rooted in the world. When he gazed upwards, he may well have been overwhelmed by the magnificence of God's greatness and grace, but his feet remained planted on the cold, inhospitable soil of the new world in which he had to live.

An understanding of Emerson requires not merely that we know something of the intellectual framework available to him, but also that we be aware of the rhetorical models, the concepts of what was possible to the spoken and written word. And once again, important as the Unitarian influence on Emerson undoubtedly was, we need also to discuss the Puritan legacy. It is probable that most of us, when we think of Puritan preachers, whether or not we know better, think in the terms of Robert South, who, in 1660, preached against the Puritan style of sermonizing. He described a man who assumed "'strange new postures . . . shutting the eyes, distorting the face, and speaking through the nose.'" What they said while thus they spoke was even worse: "'whimpering cant of *issues, products, tendencies, breathings, indwellings, rollings, recumbencies,* and scriptures misapplied.'"[26] There are sufficient fictional accounts of such excesses to vindicate such criticisms; however, South is clearly describing inhabitants of the lunatic fringes of Puritanism. In fact, the Puritan approach to rhetoric seems to have emphasized restraint and the sober application of logic to sublime (and ethical) questions.

English Puritan style has been thoroughly analysed by, among others, W. Fraser Mitchell in *English Puritan Oratory from Andrews to Tillotson: a Study of its Literary Aspects* , and by Lawrence Sasek, to whose *The Literary Temper of the English Puritans* I have already referred. Mitchell describes the two stylistic extremes of the middle seventeenth century. These we could describe as the styles of Donne and Perkins (the great Puritan divine) or the ornate and plain styles. In Donne's pulpit oratory we see examples of the ornate style; in Perkins' *The Arte of Prophesying* we have what was essentially a style manual for the

Puritan divines on both sides of the Atlantic. It is, again, particularly interesting to examine the ornate and plain styles as a prelude to a discussion of Emerson that will include an analysis of his style, since most scholars and critics who examine Emerson's style return to the influence on Emerson of various seventeenth century writers.

Richard Baxter, an Anglican divine, may have preached within the Church of England, but the style of preaching he advocated was subsequently developed by the Puritan William Perkins. Mitchell cites Baxter's insistence that

> The Plainest words are the profitablest Oratory
> in the weightiest matters. Fineness is for ornament,
> and delicacy for delight; but they answer not
> *Necessity* . . . . Yea when they are conjunct, it is
> hard for the necesitious hearer or Reader to observe
> the matter or ornament and delicacy; and not to
> hear or read a neat, concise sententious Discourse,
> and not to be hurt by it; for it usually hindereth the
> due operation of the matter and keeps it from the
> heart, and stops it in the fancy, and makes it seem as
> light as the stile.[27]

The psychology upon which Baxter's view depends is clear: ornament is dangerous because by delighting the fancy of the hearer, it keeps the "due operation of the matter" from reaching the heart (and possibly the reason) of the listener. Perkins also considered plainness to be a moral imperative, for the spoken word, the sermon, had to be plain if it could be grasped by its auditors, and had to be understood by them if their salvation were ever to occur. By plainness, then, is meant a style that attempts in all its elements (structure, syntax, diction and figurative language) to place the conveyance of its matter (content) ahead of all other concerns. Clarity, precision and simplicity will be its virtues; a deep concern for the needs of its auditors will be its motive. In his *Arte of Prophesying*,

William Perkins cited I Corinthians 2:4 as sufficient reason for advocating an unadorned style (or one in which "ornament" is always used for a purpose other than that of decorating; one's meaning might be well *illustrated* by such acceptable techniques as tropes or similitudes). Paul declares at this point in his Epistle to the Corinthians that "my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power."[28] It was believed that plainness of style would have a powerful effect on those listening -- and that the witty, elaborately structured discourses of the metaphysical Anglican divines could never achieve this effect. The cleverness of man could only obscure the power of God.

Puritan preaching may have been plain; unlearned it was certainly not. Perkins, with others, only insisted that the preacher's learning be hidden:

> *Humane wisdome* must be concealed, whether it be in the matter of the Sermon or in the setting forth of the words: because the preaching of the word is the *testimony of God*. . . . If any man thinke that by this means barbarism should be brought into the pulpits; hee must understand that the Minister may, yea and must privately use at his libertie the arts, Philosophy, and variety of reading, whilst he is framing his sermons: but he ought in publike to conceale all these from the people, and not to make the least ostentation.[29]

In order to ensure this clarity, Puritan rhetoricians turned to the French logician Petrus Ramus. He taught at Cambridge in the early 1600s, where, as an anti-Aristotelian, he was popular with the Puritan students. The importance of Ramean theory to Puritan sermonizing has been much discussed.[30] Howard H. Martin considers the contribution of the Ramean method to the plain style of the Puritans in "Ramus, Ames, Perkins and

Colonial Rhetoric." He describes the Puritan's style as "analytical," claiming that their primary need was to create sermons structured of easily remembered parts. By radically restructuring the study of rhetoric, Ramus made such a structure available. He removed arrangement and disposition from the study of rhetoric, making them part of his simplified system of logic, leaving in rhetoric only style, memory and delivery. Thus, one could do one's thinking as a logician, then, as a rhetorician, illustrate and deliver what was discovered through the application of logic to one's subject: the idea of writing as a heuristic process of discovery is clearly threatened, since thought becomes a prior and separate activity.

What Ramus meant by logic is rather extraordinary, particularly in the context of a discussion of Emerson. He conceived of the world as a logical, orderly "counterpart of an ordered hierarchy of ideas existing in the mind of God."[31] Since these correspondences exist, they must be (and can be) discovered. The means of doing so are accessible: one need only systematize all of existence, putting all ideas into their proper categories. This could be done by dichotomizing, by arranging experience into pairs (man/woman, sun/moon, summer/winter, love/hate). Perry Miller comments:

> The task of the logician (and the preacher must be a logician) was that of arranging everything in pairs under the proper rubrics. Thinking was not conceived as a method by which we compose our knowledge discovery by discovery, but as the unveiling of an ideal form. Knowledge was a schedule to be filled in. . . . When all existence was thus systematized, the problem of seeing the architecture of the whole, of grasping the diagram of the universe, became relatively simple.[32]

Emerson also often employed a rhetoric of extremes, and he certainly is known for his adoption of the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence: the notion that particulars in

the natural world correspond to particulars in the spiritual world. Clearly, however, this way of viewing the natural world was available to Emerson from a nearer source: it was a part of his intellectual heritage.

Because the Puritan could thus see a world composed entirely of opposites, he was able, as Babette Levy puts it (in *Preaching in the First Half Century of New England History*) to view actions as "either good or bad, depending upon their doer's state of grace; men were either saved or damned."[33] This habit of dichotomizing entered into Puritan sermon construction: it permitted the development of sermons that could be easily followed and from which notes could easily be taken. Howard Martin suggests that the simplification of issues made possible by this form of arranging ideas appealed to Puritan preachers partly because it did ensure that their sermons would be accessible to relatively uneducated congregants.[34] Levy also attributes the very simple text-doctrine-application structure of the Puritan sermon to Ramean theory:

> The wording of texts were analyzed or 'opened';
> the results were combined, by the Ramist method
> of genesis, to form the doctrine. Every statement
> was followed by its reasons or proofs -- a direct
> method of procedure relying much upon axiomatic
> truth rather than upon syllogistic reasoning. Then
> again, the Ramist idea was that the theory or art
> involved in solving a difficulty mattered less than
> the use or purpose to which one put the conclusion one
> arrived at; a reflection of this utilitarian way of thinking
> may be seen in the long 'uses' and 'applications' of the
> doctrine with which each sermon came to an end.[35]

The importance of Ramus's theories to Puritan preaching is obviously considerable; the significance of this way of thinking and of arranging one's ideas to Emerson I will discuss in more detail later.

The acceptance of the ideas of Ramus and Perkins in New England was assured from the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony by the close connections between the English Puritan theorists and the divines who left for the New World. In the sermons of John Cotton, for example, the connections are clear. Perkins' description, near the end of *The Arte of Prophecying* of 'The Order and Svmme of the Sacred and onely method of Preaching' succinctly describes the outline of any of Cotton's sermons:

> 1. To reade the Text distinctly out of the Canonicall Scriptures.
> 2. To give the sense and vnderstanding of it being read, by the Scripture it self.
> 3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the natvrall sense.
> 4. To apply (if he have the gift) the doctrines rightly collected, to the life and manners of men in a simple and plaine speech.[36]

When Cotton does go beyond straight exposition, it is to clarify his meaning by the use of similitudes, illustrations taken from ordinary life, and "so worded," as Levy notes, "that the dullest member of the congregation could understand."[37] The preacher sought to ensure that none should be excluded by avoiding displays of learning and eloquence which would not only confuse the essential truths being discussed, but also distract the listeners from the doctrine being presented.

If the church was to function at the spiritual (as well as architectural) centre of each New England town, it was the responsibility of each preacher to instruct saints and reprobates in terms they could understand and apply. Emerson's desire, as a fledgling

pastor, to be free to use illustrations and examples from all areas of life and study,[38] tentative as it was given the expectations of his prim Unitarian congregation, would have needed no apology had he been addressing a Puritan audience.

The opening of John Cotton's sermon "Swine and Goats" shows both his awareness of the rural employment of most of his auditors, and the influence of Ramean dichotomizing:

> All the men in the world are divided into two ranks, Godly or Ungodly, Righteous or Wicked; of wicked men two sorts, some are notoriously wicked, others are Hypocrites: Of Hypocrites two sorts (and you shall find them in the Church of God) some are washed Swine, others are Goats.
>
> 1. The *Swine* are those of whom our Saviour Christ saith, *That they returne unto their wallowing in the mire*; like unto these are such men who at the hearing of some Sermon have been stomach sick of their sins, and have rejected their wicked courses, but yet the swines heart remaineth in them, as a Swine when he cometh where the puddle is, will readily lye down in it: so will these men wallow in the puddle of their uncleannesse when their conscience is not pricked for the present. . . . [39]

It's a remarkable habit of mind: two ranks, two sorts, washed swine and recalcitrant goats. One can easily imagine the congregants, used to hearing such dichotomizing, taking the notes that would be made so easy by this method of sermonizing. Cotton's syntax is straightforward; his diction is visceral and taken directly from the

daily concerns of his audience. He moves from statement to similitude (familiar both in its barnyard reference and in its scriptural origins) with ease, and the vehicle and tenor of his metaphor remain clear and easily distinguishable. Plain this may be, but any sophisticated reader is bound to recognize that this is not the result of casual preparation: it is too structured, too mannered, even, to be extemporaneous. Art there is, but it is the hidden art recommended by Perkins.

Given the stress the Puritans placed on having a clergy literate enough to be able both to open difficult texts and to explain their meanings in a plain and accessible style that remained aware of the significance of its subject, it is hardly surprising that the divines who founded Massachusetts Bay Colony should have established Harvard College only six years after their arrival in the inhospitable New World. The Puritans founded Harvard in 1636; they dominated it until 1803, when the death of the incumbent Hollis Professor of Divinity began a two year struggle between conservative and liberal factions at the college. This contest ended in 1805 when the Unitarians Henry Ware and Samuel Webber were appointed as Hollis Professor and president.[40] The conservative (Calvinist) losers responded by founding their own divinity school at Andover in 1808; the Unitarians eventually established the (unofficially Unitarian) Harvard Divinity School in 1815. By the early years of the nineteenth century, then, two opposed factions within the congregational churches of New England faced each other across a widening gulf. Certainly theological differences had existed within Puritan orthodoxy before this; Peter Bulkeley and John Cotton are, for example, two Puritans who represent the extremes of what was possible within Puritan orthodoxy, the former emphasizing God's mercy and the latter His justice. But these differences existed within a larger context of agreement, and the existence of only one college to train all ministers had ensured a uniformity of both theology and its rhetorical expression.[41] But by 1805 (in fact, well before that date) there were two antagonistic theologies functioning in New England, and two competing schools of rhetoric for expressing them. Emerson grew up in the Unitarian fold, although he was well aware of

the competing claims of Calvinism. He subsequently spurned the theology, psychology and rhetoric of Unitarianism -- but not before his thought and style had been strongly marked by them. Many things distinguished the Unitarians from their Puritan forebears, but their attitudes to perfectibility, to what is naturally possible to mankind was central to most of these. Unitarianism began simply as a liberal faction within Puritanism; the church buildings that Unitarian congregations or ministers (congregations and ministers not always finding themselves well matched in these matters) used had all been built by Puritan Calvinists. As William Hutchison has shown, in *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* , such a beginning to the Unitarian movement was made possible by the congregational nature of New England church structure.[42] There was simply no mechanism to ensure doctrinal purity, and once Harvard began graduating liberal ministers, the spread of liberal theology was ensured.

It is probably easiest to begin to focus the differences between the Puritan and Unitarian theologies and rhetorical approaches to sermon writing by citing a passage from a sermon by the most famous Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, and contrasting it with that cited above from John Cotton's "Swines and Goats." The following passage is taken from Channing's "The Great Purpose of Christianity"; it was given in Boston in 1828. He begins by asking his auditors "Why was Christianity given?" In his first paragraph, he gives them this answer:

> The glory of Christianity is the pure and lofty action
> which it communicates to the human mind. It does
> not breathe a timid, abject spirit. . . . It gives power,
> energy, courage, constancy to the will; love, disinterest-
> edness, enlarged affection to the heart, soundness, clear-
> ness, and vigor to the understanding. It rescues him who
> receives it from sin, from the sway of the passions;
> gives him the full and free use of his best powers, brings out

> and brightens the divine image in which he was created; and in this way not only bestows the promise but the beginning of heaven.

"This," he continues, "is the subject I wish to illustrate." He then warns his audience to

> remember that in this discourse I speak in my own name and in no other. . . . I wish to regard myself as belonging not to a sect, but to the community of free minds, of lovers of truth, of followers of Christ, both on earth and in heaven. I desire to escape the narrow walls of a particular church and to live under the open sky, in the broad light, looking far and wide, seeing with my own eyes, hearing with my own ears, and following truth meekly. . . . I am, then, no organ of a sect, but speak from myself alone. . . [laying] open my whole mind with freedom and simplicity. [43]

Channing speaks from himself alone; Cotton from God alone. Channing's ideas on the nature of God and man, as well as those on the function, form, and content of the sermon differ completely from those informing the theology and sermons of John Cotton. Channing is polite, and his prose achieves a high level of abstraction. He offers his auditors a view of themselves as *receivers* of salvation, as those who have simply accepted something that is on permanent offer. Accepting Christianity frees one's "best powers" and "brings out and brightens the divine image in which" we are all created. We are not created sinners. We do require rescue, but only so that our inherent goodness can shine again. So innately good are we, in fact, that once this "brightness" is released, we begin to experience heaven. Obviously, this view of human nature differs fundamentally from the Calvinist belief in original sin and "total depravity." The idea that the weak sinner (who was originally good) has simply to "receive" Christianity in order to be effectively rescued

is too simple, too benign. Channing offers the reprobate a vision of his perfected self, Cotton more routinely provides glimpses of what awaits the sinner. But Channing's beliefs and his manner of expression were far from new in America. Channing, as we shall see, merely contributed a particularly Romantic tinge to ideas that had been competing with Calvinism for dominance in American theology for a century.

The emergence of liberalism can be traced straight back to the founding fathers (Peter Bulkeley, as we have seen, for example, emphasized God's mercy at the expense of His sterner attribute, justice). It is more common to connect it to the decline in pietistic ardour that began in the second generation of colonizers. Certainly by 1662, the Puritans were willing to offer church membership to baptized persons who had not yet experienced full conversion. And by the 1690s, the New Charter began to formalize the move to a more tolerant, secular society. In 1708, Harvard had its first non-clerical president (John Leverett), and, as Samuel Morison notes, in *Three Centuries of Harvard* , students began to attend Harvard "to be made gentlemen, not to study" divinity.[44] Post-restoration English preaching models were introduced to Harvard students, and Archbishop John Tillotson, whose polite, cautious sermons exemplified the aesthetic ideals of such moral essayists as Addison and Steele, became the standard by which many new preachers judged their own efforts.

The rhetorical strategies employed by Tillotson were well-adapted to the needs of the English Restoration: designed to emphasize commonality and agreement, his sermons were bound to be pleasing to audiences who had recently, in the Civil War, seen the violence that passionately held opinion (the "enthusiasm" dreaded by moderate Anglicans and Puritans), expressed in terms designed to emphasize differences and to force radical choice, could cause. Latitudinarian and ethical (not pietistic) preaching seemed to follow one another naturally, and, as James Downey points out in *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit* ,

> [t]he church seemed almost to become a society for
> the reformation of manners, a place where kindred

> spirits met to have their moral sensibilities tuned to
> a finer pitch. Many preachers, like Pope's 'soft Dean,'
> could not bring themselves to mention 'Hell to ears
> polite.'[45]

Prosperous merchants in New England were equally adverse to hearing about Hell -- after all, their own efforts had secured for them comfort on earth.

The great emphasis of the Augustans upon the primacy of reason carried through to their religious thought, since what accords with reason must be agreed upon by all reasonable men. This, we cannot help but remember, is precisely the argument used by John Cotton to justify religious persecution -- the Puritans also believed that their rhetoric was based on the inevitability of the agreement of reasonable men. But they believed with equal fervour that their listeners' hearts must be, not merely touched, but *pierced* by the arrows of their words. If we look at a passage from Tillotson's most famous and revealingly entitled sermon, "His Commandments are not Grevious," we can begin to see the similarities between his courteous, kindly, and eminently clear prose and that of Channing:

> The laws of God are reasonable, that is, suitable
> to our nature and advantageous to our interest. It
> is true God hath a sovereign right over us as we are
> his creatures, and by virtue of this right he might
> without injustice have imposed different tasks upon
> us, and have required hard things at our hands. But
> in making laws for us he hath not made use of this
> right. He hath commanded us nothing in the gospel
> that is either unsuitable to our reason, or prejudicial
> to our interest; nay, nothing that is severe and against
> the grain of our nature. . . . [46]

The emphases are obvious: reason and self-interest will ensure goodness. If Tillotson doesn't fully commit the Pelagian heresy, if he doesn't offer the possibility of perfection on earth, he certainly avoids even more assiduously the other extreme of emphasizing man's "total depravity." Here, as with Channing's, we have a sermon which spends little time explicating a text (Channing once described the text as the point from which the preacher departed, rather than the main subject of his discourse -- unimaginable to a Puritan). Tillotson, like Channing, speaks to the most general of issues (again, contrast the extreme specificity of Cotton) in consistently general terms. While Cotton's sermon must surely have frightened his congregants and awoken any guilty conscience (and, no doubt, at least as many innocent ones), these passages from Channing and Tillotson could only pacify and reassure their listeners. Not surprisingly, Boston liberals, having learned to admire Tillotson while studying at Harvard, began to preach sermons emphasizing love, reconciliation and tolerance,[47] as we have found Channing continuing to do a hundred odd years later.

Not all preachers were satisfied with either this pulpit style or the theological presuppositions upon which it was based: that a reasonable God could not do unreasonable things, and that essentially good persons could find their own unassisted way to God. Original sin, predestination and election were all quietly gotten rid of in favour of innate goodness and an Arminian assurance that a loving God could turn away no sincerely seeking soul. Teresa Talouse, in her recent study of "the 'true' connection between Spirit and external form" (*The Art of Prophesying*) as it is manifest in the sermons of John Cotton, Benjamin Colman, William Ellery Channing, and Waldo Emerson, cites Coleridge's objections to this form of religion in *The Friend* . She summarizes his argument in the following manner:

> . . . while religious truth should be self-evident, it
> has been defined by philosophers like [William] Paley
> as a matter of moral expediency. As a result, religion's

> value has become totally subjective, gauged by its effect on an agent's actions, rather than a function of the divine principles which should underlie all moral action. . . . [48]

Coleridge's objections to ethical preaching are based on his recognition that these divines were rejecting the power and authority of the Spirit in favour of the importance of their own utilitarian logic. Enlightened self interest could not, to Coleridge, be the basis for moral action; rather, it must come from what he describes as "'an objective, self-evident belief.'" Although such arguments as these were as yet unheard in America (they ultimately did greatly influence Emerson, via *The Friend*); there were other, related, grounds for entering into debate with the liberals of Boston.

Preachers remained in New England who held fast to the Calvinist doctrines and large numbers of congregants were dissatisfied with the shift from a profound piety to a rather simplistic and comfortable moralism. Sufficient numbers of New Englanders were so spiritually restless that when the Great Awakening began[49] in the 1730s, it found many willing ears and desirous hearts. Rationalism failed to satisfy, as it later failed to satisfy Emerson. As William G. McLoughlin, in *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* , explains, awakenings are characterized by a return to a sense of divine immanence, as "the gap between this world and the next disappears" with the result that "[t]he spiritual and physical worlds intermingle."[50] But if God is immanent, and sweetly shadowed forth in His creation, so is the reality of sin overwhelmingly real, and it is an *angry* God who "holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathesome insect over the fire. . . ." To Jonathan Edwards, the inspiration of the New Lights, the power of God was real and overwhelming -- nothing polite about *his* God. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," his most famous sermon, is a perfect example of a sermon that in its prose and its psychological and theological assumptions stands as a

contemporary alternative to the polite correctness of such Boston liberals as Charles Chauncy.

"Sinners" takes its text ("Their foot shall slide in due time" [Deuteronomy 32:35] -- a text obviously intended to unsettle) and examines it minutely, page after terrifying page. Edwards' prose is plain. It is full of the similitudes and tropes so popular with earlier Puritan preachers, used once again to open the text to the understanding of the simplest listener. The theological content of the sermon could hardly be simpler: we are all sinners kept from the judgement we deserve (damnation) by the grace of a justly and dangerously angry God. The pronouns Edwards uses are primarily second person: this is a direct, immediate, overwhelming address, and the speaker is obviously the mouthpiece of the God whose words he cites so copiously. Edwards concludes his sermon with a surprisingly inclusive (for one who denied the freedom of the will) call to the penitent:

> Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation: Let everyone fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."[51]

While I don't argue that Tillotson and other ethical preachers ignored the affective side of preaching, it is evident that the emotions addressed by Edwards are *not* the emotions Tillotson seeks to stir. The metaphor of piercing continues to be apt -- these words are like arrows. Edwards doesn't gently seek to sway the reasonable and tender feelings of his enlightened audience; he strives to awaken them to the terrifying reality of their spiritual danger.

The prose of both the ethical preachers and Edwards can be described as plain, in that neither embraces ornament, elaborate or inverted sentence structures, classical

tags and so on. In this sense, both styles are products of one impulse -- the reaction against metaphysical excesses that led Bishop Sprat to urge the Royal Society (in 1667) to

> reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style, to return back to the primitive purity and shortness, when men delivered so many things almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking: positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants before that of wits or scholars.[52]

Certainly we can imagine Edwards taking "the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants" -- or of anyone else -- if it would help him to speak directly to the understanding of his hearers. But Tillotson, and Channing, speak a *gentlemanly* language: correct, polite, restrained, its greatest strength is its intelligent flexibility and moderation; its greatest weakness its inability to express whatever a refined gentleman couldn't publicly face. Topics such as the reality of hell were certainly not appropriate for "ears polite." Whereas Edwards' words are chosen, as were those of his Puritan forebears, to enable the Holy Spirit to use them to pierce and penetrate the hearts of his hearers, Channing's are clearly addressed to the understanding of his rational, well-educated, secure congregants. The very security that Edwards seeks to unsettle, Channing's rhetoric is designed to assure. One intends to stir the affections, the other to convince the intellect. Neither is lacking in either affective or rational content, but in each, one of the two dominates.

At Harvard, correctness won out over what Edwards had to offer, and by 1805 what was taught at Harvard was the correct, precise rhetoric of such a *belle lettrist* as Hugh Blair. An alternative continued to exist among the evangelical preachers, but the

ministers who filled the liberal pulpits in and around Boston in the early 19th century were thoroughly schooled in the rhetoric of neoclassicism.[53] Its psychology and rhetoric were both based on the work of John Locke -- but not, as in the case of Edwards, because of a passionate attempt to unite word to sensory experience so as to shock the ears and slumbering consciences of audiences. Locke's optimism was what appealed to Boston liberals, his refusal to accept the concept of original sin (a *tabula rasa* can't be born a sinner). The rhetoric that was developed by liberals from his work on language emphasized precision and correctness -- words tied to meanings. To say that Emerson in turn was enormously influenced by such teaching is to understate the case: he grew up *breathing* Unitarianism, and its language and thought became his. From their concepts of perfectibility came his, and it was to their style (for years and in some ways forever it was his) that he reacted so violently. Before looking at Emerson's earliest formal prose -- the sermons written during the years of his ministry -- we need to look at the most direct influence upon Emerson, that exerted by William Ellery Channing, the saint of Boston. I will begin the following chapter by examining Channing's vision of perfectibility and the rhetorical strategies he employed to convince his hearers of their very high calling. From Channing I will turn directly to Emerson's first sermons, comparing them in their thought and style to those of Channing.

1 Edward Johnson, *Wonder Working Providence of Sion's Savior, The Puritans*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: American Book Company, 1938) 145.

2 Frederic Carpenter, *American Literature and the Dream* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955) 5.

3 William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, Miller 100 - 101.

4 Bradford 101.

5 Bradford 101.

6 Miller, "Introduction" 7, italics added.

7 John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978) 12 - 13.

8 Stow Persons, *American Minds: A History of Ideas* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958) 65.

9 His acceptance of them was more complex; referring to Williams, Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (in *The Puritans*) comment:

> He first landed . . . in 1631, and was chosen teacher of the church of Salem, but objecting that the church was not "separated" from the Church of England, he refused the office and went to Plymouth, where he ministered for a year or so, but was not officially ordained; in 1633 he returned to Salem, was again chosen minister, and accepted the post. (214)

10 John Cotton, *The Bloudy Tenent, washed, And made white in the bloud of the Lambe*, Miller 218.

11 Lawrence Sasek, *The Literary Temper of the English Puritans* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1961) 22 - 24.

12 Miller, "Introduction" 43.

13 Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," *Errand into the Wilderness* . (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956) 57.

14 Eugene E. White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," *Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit 1630 - 1967* ed. DeWitte Holland (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971) 26.

15 Peter Bulkely, *The Gospel Covenant Opened* . Early English Books (London: n.p., 1674) B.

16 Anne Bradstreet, "The Weary Pilgrim," *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse* ed. John Harvard Ellis (New York: Peter Smith, 1932) 43.

17 Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Luther's Works* eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) 31: 299.

18 John Calvin, "The way we receive the Grace of Christ," "Against the fear of death," *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols, The Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols (London: SCM Press 1984) 20: 717.

19 John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 94 - 99.

20 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (1666; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1922) 103.

21 Passmore 145.

22 Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) 34.

23 John Cotton, "Christian Calling," *The way of Life,* Miller 319.

24 The problem is discussed by many critics, notably Stephen Whicher (*Freedom and Fate*), Henry Smith Nash ("Emerson's Problem of Vocation: A Note on The American

Scholar'"), David Robinson (*Apostle of Culture)*, and, most recently, Julie Ellison (*Emerson's Romanatic Style).*

25 Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 47.

26 Robert South, *Works*, (1823), James Downey, *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield and Wesley* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969) 23.

27 W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: a Study of its Literary Aspects* (London: London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932) 271.

28 William Perkins, *Art of Prophesying*, Mitchell 41.

29 Perkins, Mitchell 100.

30 Among the most useful discussion are Perry Miller's (in *The Puritans)*, Babette Levy's (*Preaching in the First Half Century of New England History*), W. Fraser Mitchell (*English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of its Literary Aspects*), and Howard H. Martin ("Ramus, Ames, Perkins and Colonial Rhetoric").

31 Miller 31.

32 Miller 32.

33 Babette Levy, *Preaching in the First Half Century of New England History* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1945) 19.

34 Howard Martin, "Ramus, Ames, Perkins And Colonial Rhetoric," ?

35 Levy 19.

36 Perkins, Mitchell 99 - 100.

37 Levy 131 - 132.

38 In "The Christian Minister: Part I," a sermon delivered a few days after his ordination on March 11, 1829, Emerson warned his congregation:

> I shall labour then, brethren, as far as my poor abilities will reach, to use a freedom in my preaching befitting the greatness of the Gospel and its universal application to all human concerns. I shall not be so much afraid of innovation as to scruple about introducing new forms of address, new modes of illustration, and varied allusions into the pulpit, when I believe they can be introduced with advantage. I shall not certainly reject them simply because they are new. I must not be crippled in the exercise of my profession.

Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 3 vols. (n.p., University of Missouri Press, 1989 1: 235.

39 John Cotton, "Swine and Goats," *The New Covenant, or A Treatise, unfolding the order and manner of the giving and receiving of the Covenant of Grace to the Elect*, Miller (London 1654) 314.

40 Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805 - 1861*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970) 4.

41 Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitariainism in America* (n.p.: Archon Books, 1976) 34.

42 William E. Channing, "The Great Purpose of Christianity, *The Works of William E. Channing, D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886) 246.

43 Channing 246 - 247.

44 Samuel Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard: 1636 - 1936* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936) 60.

45 Downey 10.

46 John Tillotson, "His Commandments Are Not Grevious," *Works*, Downey 14 - 15.

47 Stout 132 - 133. Stout also comments on the often-overlooked fact that the rational preachers of Boston continued to emphasize Sola Scriptura -- they remained orthodox even while they explored new rhetorical strategies, topics and attitudes (222 - 223).

48 Teresa Talouse, *The Art of Prophesying: New England Sermons and the Shaping of Belief* (n.p.: University of Georgia Press, 1990) 130.

49 The causes of the Awakening are discussed from this point of view by William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607 - 1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 45 ff.

50 McLoughlin 20.

51 Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," *The Works of President Edwards*, 8 vols (Leeds: Edward Baines, 1810) 6: 499 - 500.

52 Thomas Sprat, "The Language of Its Members," *The History of the Royal Society, The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 2 vols., 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 1: 1705.

53 For discussions of just what was taught at Harvard, see Edgeley Woodman Todd ("Philosophical Ideas at Harvard College, 1817 - 1837," *New England Quarterly* 16 [1943]: 63 - 90) and Samuel Elliot Morison (*Three Centuries at Harvard).*

Chapter Three
The Unitarian Response

Given their reputation as cautious, platitudinous moralists, an examination of Unitarian rhetorical theory as it is demonstrated in their sermons would seem to be a boring enterprise. And since I intend to focus my discussion on William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian saint beloved of prosperous Boston, all hope for anything but a chronicle of virtuous dullness may appear absurd. At times, sandwiched as they are between the ardent piety of the Puritans and the "midsummer night's madness" of the Transcendentalists (the phrase is applied to their dealings by Perry Miller), the Unitarians do seem to be nothing more than well meaning, spiritless upholders of conventional morality. And yet, there is something bizarrely fascinating about them, about the perfect restraint with which they put forward the notion (which in Puritan hands would have been anything but restrained) that perfection is fully within the grasp of mankind. Current scholarship is suggesting, furthermore, that the Unitarians were not quite as frigid as their contemporary detractors would have had it, that the Unitarians actually continued the pietism of the Puritans. The more traditional view of the Unitarians is voiced by Alexander Kern in his still influential essay "The Rise of Transcendentalism." Kern describes the Transcendentalists as being "in reaction against the sterile repudiations and cold complacency of "Unitarianism."[1] Sterile, cold, negative and complacent: these are the standard criticisms of the Unitarians. Unitarian sermons have attracted relatively little attention (largely, I suppose, because they articulate concepts and focus on issues no longer of interest), although there have been a few excellent studies. Dated and stale as they sound and are, they can hold our attention, if for no other reason than that they put forth, in their calm, detached neoclassical prose, ideas that only the most spiritually intoxicated Puritan could have held. Emerson's sermons, most of which were written while he remained in the Unitarian fold (to him it came to seem a prison) show the influence of both Unitarian rhetoric and theology; as such the sermonizing of the Unitarians forms an inevitable prelude to our discussion of Emerson himself. I will focus my discussion on William Ellery Channing, not only because he was

the greatest of the Unitarians, but also because of the influence he had on Emerson. I hesitate to suggest that his preaching was typical of the Unitarians -- it seems to me a weakness in the otherwise excellent revisionist works on Unitarianism by Lawrence Buell and David Robinson (*Literary Transcendentalism* and *Apostle of Culture*) that they draw conclusions about Unitarian preaching in general while discussing the most extreme and gifted ministers -- like Channing -- the movement had. However, we can, I think be reasonably confident that what Channing accomplished became what most Unitarian preachers aspired to; certainly the young Emerson admired his mentor greatly, believing his sermons to embody the eloquence he so desperately sought as a young man. In 1823 Emerson wrote to his Aunt Mary Emerson:

> Dr. Channing is preaching sublime sermons
> every Sunday morning in Federal Street, one of
> which I heard last Sunday, and which surpassed
> [Edward] Everett's eloquence.[2]

In his Journal, in the following year, Emerson described "Dr. Channing's Dudleian Lecture" as the model of what he meant by "the moral imagination," or "the highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects."[3]

That Channing believed in the perfectibility of mankind is made abundantly clear in many of his sermons; a number of these were gathered together by his nephew, William Henry Channing, and published in 1872 under the title *The Perfect Life*. W. H. Channing describes the "Discourses" contained in that volume as "a minister's pulpit addresses to his own congregation . . . . [w]ritten for delivery, week by week, during the last ten years of Channing's life."[4] The sermons, then, were given during the 1830s, and represent a gathering of discourses on a principal concern of Channing's. They contain little, however, that Channing didn't express on frequent occasions earlier in his career.

In the first of these sermons, Channing describes the process of spiritual development. That it is a process is significant, for part of what distinguishes liberal from

post-Great Awakening Calvinists is the emphasis placed by the former on the gradual nature of conversion and the insistence of the latter that conversion occurs as a tremendous, overwhelming, immediate experience.[5] Channing, using the organic metaphor typical of the Unitarians[6] writes that a childish view of God "takes root, and from this religion grows up." This childish notion gives way as "we advance . . .[and] purify our thought of God."[7] Furthermore,

> . . .there is in refined minds a still profounder and more urgent impulse, already indicated, the longing for perfection, for deliverance from all evil, for perpetual progress, the desire to realize in character that bright ideal of which all noble souls conceive.[8]

According to this, only a few (presumably not all minds are "refined") will have the desire for, and thus the ability to achieve, perfection. However, elsewhere and more commonly, Channing insists that "we all possess this capacity for religion . . . . It is . . . the central and all-pervading principle of human nature."

This religious impulse is ours to develop; "by proper means it may be cultivated, expanded, and made supreme. . . . The world within is our great domain, worth infinitely more than the world without."[9] Channing, as is his habit, asks his congregation, "Do you ask by what means this end . . . can be attained?" and answers himself:

> We must not leave to others the duty of thinking for us. We must not be contented to look through others' eyes. We must exercise our own minds with concentrated and continuous energy.[10]

It is the responsibility of the individual to develop his spiritual nature, and Channing continues by instructing his congregation in the means provided by God for their instruction.

Channing suggests three sources of truth regarding the nature of God. These are revelation (learned by studying the word of God, the Old Testament God to be understood only in connection with the Christ of the New); nature (Christ came, "not to shut us up in a book, but to open the universe as our school of spiritual instruction"); and finally, "obedience to God's will, so far as we know it." But, cautions Channing, we must read the books of God and nature with care: only a mind purified by obedience to God will be able to have a "real" knowledge of God. Otherwise, we will have merely a "theory." That it will be a "just one" Channing concedes; still,

> . . . it will be theory only. It will be a knowledge of words more than of realities, -- a vague, superficial apprehension, -- unless the mind prepare itself by purifying obedience for an intimate knowledge of God. Moral discipline is much more important than a merely intellectual one, for gaining just apprehensions of the Supreme Being. [11]

We can achieve the "real knowledge" necessary for moral perfection by developing that which is God-like within us. This done (through the application of "moral discipline") we will recognize the truth of what we read and see of God in his two "books." Only when "my own spirit" has made "progress in truth and virtue, and so reveals to me a measure of its power and beauty" will what we hear about "immortality" be more than mere sounds to us. Except that the active agent is our own selves, and not God, except that the two forms of revelation (scripture and nature) are deemed worthless until we have created that within ourselves to which they can correspond -- with the exception of these very significant factors, this could be Jonathan Edwards. Words will be mere sounds unless they are connected to (for Edwards) sensations, or, for Channing, to inward agreement. The common point in this view of rhetoric is, of course, the thought of John Locke.[12]

Channing's argument is almost perfectly circular: when our feelings correspond to what our minds receive, we will know the truth of our intellectual knowledge. But our feelings must first be developed through "moral discipline," which we acquire by studying God's word in a "spirit of obedience." This spirit, Channing explains, comes through "purifying" ourselves "from all known evil." Furthermore, ardent prayer must be made to God that He will "animate" our conflict with our "bad passions and habits" and grant us "steadfast obedience to his will." Once we are purified of what is evil in us, what is left is good; this will correspond to God's own nature; thus, we know God's nature by its correspondence with what is good in ours. The problem is, of course, that we can only distinguish what is good from what is evil in our nature by an unnamed process; I presume it is in fact by our intellectual assent to the inherent goodness of certain qualities. The fundamental assumptions throughout are two: first, that man's nature is basically good (remove the evil and what remains is good [this in complete contradistinction to Calvinism]); second, that life is a self-willed progress from imperfection to moral perfection.

In his demand for an ardent, obedient approach to God through the use of moral discipline, Channing is following his own insistence that religion must address not only the reason but also the affections. As Daniel Walker Howe points out in *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805 - 1861*, Unitarians combined pietism with moralism, the religious affections with benevolence. To the Unitarian, Howe claims,

> the benevolent and religious feelings . . . were entirely natural to man. What was required was not a supernatural gift [not grace] but simply practice in directing the charitable affections toward an unseen object. By cultivating the proper "sentiments," a man could achieve that "sensibility"

> required for the model Christian character. Through the development of his own emotional nature, the Liberal priest hoped to ascend the ladder of love to God.[13]

Practice, direct, cultivate, achieve, develop -- and ascend. Certainly this is the model, and yet, in his hefty *Channing's Life*, William Henry Channing describes the moment when his uncle felt the truth of the moral philosophy he had been studying at Harvard between 1794 and 1798. It is essentially a conversion experience:

> The more his character and mind matured, the more earnestly did he devote himself to aspirations after moral greatness . . . . [T]he two authors who most served to guide his thought at this period were Hutcheson and Ferguson. It was while reading, one day, in the former, some of the various passages in which he asserts man's capacity for disinterested affection . . . . that there suddenly burst upon his mind that view of the dignity of human nature which was ever after to "uphold and cherish" him, and thenceforth to be "the fountain light of all his day, the master light of all his seeing." He was, at the time, walking as he read, beneath a clump of yew standing in the meadow. . . . The place and the hour were always sacred in his memory . . . . It seemed to him that he then passed through a new spiritual birth, and entered upon the day of eternal peace and joy . . . . and he was so borne away in rapturous visions that . . . "I longed to die, and

> felt as if heaven alone could give room for the exercise of such emotions . . . ."[14]

As Howe notes, one of Hutcheson's contributions to moral philosophy was his development of the notion that the moral sense (an innate faculty -- not an innate idea, but more or less the equivalent of the conscience and reason combined[15]) "was a form of aesthetic taste."[16] What enraptured Channing was, of course, the endless possibilities for moral advancement through the development of the religious affections made possible by Hutcheson's philosophy. Here was a promise of progress to perfection which could be achieved not through arid mental exercises, but by the cultivation of a mind nourished by "a combination of religious affection and moral taste."[17]

Both Howe and David Robinson discuss the elements of Unitarian pietism -- its emotionalism, devotionalism and asceticism[18] -- which we have seen represented in the passages I quoted above from Channing's *The Perfect Life*. In those passages, too, we can see the seeds of ideas that later bore peculiar fruit in Emerson's essays: duty, self-reliance, correspondence and the deity of man. All of these concepts are directly connected by Channing to perfectibility. Before looking more closely at Emerson's sermons, I would like to examine Unitarian rhetorical theory, the means by which Unitarian ministers attempted to express their pietistic moralism. Emerson was trained at the same school and by the same teachers as were all Unitarian ministers; as such, an understanding of the principles of expression taught by (and to prospective) Unitarian clergy is of considerable importance to an understanding of Emerson's development.

The following passage is taken again from Channing's The Perfect Life, and is part of a sermon entitled "God Revealed in the Universe and in Humanity":

> What blessedness it is to dwell amidst this transparent air, which the eye can pierce without limit, amidst these floods of pure, soft, cheering light, under this immeasurable arch of heaven, and in sight

> of these countless stars! An infinite universe is the sign and symbol of infinite power, intelligence, purity, bliss, and love. It is a pledge from the Living God of boundless and endless communications of happiness, truth, and virtue. Thus are we always in contact, if I may so say, with the infinite, as comprehended, penetrated and quickened by it. What unutterable import is there in the teaching of such a revelation! What a name is written all through it in characters of celestial light! A spiritual voice pervades it, more solemn, sublime, and thrilling than if the roar of oceans, thunders, whirlwinds, and conflagrations were concentrated in one burst of praise. This voice is all the more eloquent because it is spiritual; because it is the voice in which the All-Wise speaks to all intelligences.[19]

It seems remarkable to find remnants of Puritan diction ("pierce," "penetrated") and typology (the universe as "the sign and symbol of infinite power") coupled with such tasteful adjectives as "cheering," strings of abstract nouns like "happiness, truth, and virtue," and polite phrases as "if I may say." The aesthetic of the sublime is also represented both literally, in Channing's use of the word in the phrase "more solemn, sublime, and thrilling," and by his reference to the "roar of oceans, thunders, whirlwinds, and conflagrations." Effusive as the passage is, it remains inert, relying on such mechanical devices as exclamation points to mark its climactic moments. It is certainly plain, in the sense that it is syntactically uncomplicated, and polite -- it is obviously written by a gentleman (a very spiritual one) to other gentlefolk. Nothing unpleasant is mentioned; there is a courteous bow to the audience ("if I may say"), and, if the passage is virtually

meaningless (all that is said is that God is visible in His creation), it abounds with abstractions that create a comfortable feeling of depth of significance. Where Cotton or Edwards would have convinced their listeners of the power of God's universe through their words, through similitudes, through concrete details that would have pierced and penetrated, Channing can only assert its power, politely. Undoubtedly Channing's audience would be left feeling virtuous and vaguely spiritual. Since that will have been a significant part of Channing's aim (to make the feelings of his audience correspond with his argument that each of them was fundamentally good, so that their feelings could "prove" his intellectual content) we can, I suppose, judge the passage to be successful. It remains, however, stunningly, almost mesmerizingly, bland.

The passages I have quoted from Channing's sermons reveal a number of assumptions about the psychological processes of his auditors. Foremost among these, as I have mentioned, is the conviction that good preaching must appeal simultaneously to the reason and to the emotions. There is nothing new about this; St. Augustine urged Christian orators "to sway the mind so as to subdue the will," and "to instruct and arouse the listener."[20] What makes Unitarians distinct from centuries of preachers is their belief that the art of the sacred orator will enable him to cause his auditor to give an essential emotional assent to doctrines of which his listener's intellect has already approved. These people are, at heart, good; they need only to be motivated to do that good.

Edward Tyrell Channing, younger brother of William Ellery, and Boyston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard from 1819 to 1851, discussed the Unitarian approach to sacred rhetoric in the sermon he gave on the occasion of his induction into office, "The Orator and His Times". While he admits that "[i]t is, indeed, true, that the imagination and passions do not predominate in modern eloquence, [that] they are not our turbulent masters," he goes on to claim that

> . . . we think it a false philosophy which tells us that
> it can ever be the effect of general improvement to

> separate them from the judgement. We let them work with the judgement; and they work safely, forming and perfecting the character, enlivening the truth and impressing it deeply, rendering our serious labours agreeable and efficient, making us love what we approve, and act earnestly after we have chosen wisely.[21]

Howe notes that "[t]he legitimate function of rhetoric was to enlist the emotions in the service of reason and the moral sense, and comments that, to the Unitarians, a "speaker who went beyond this was a demagogue, a revolutionary who would overturn the established order of things."[22] Thus any tendency towards enthusiasm would always be tempered by the moralistic aim of Unitarian piety -- appeals to the emotions were only intended to win psychological support for doctrines to which the rational judgement had previously assented.

The vagueness, the unwillingness to deal directly with significant issues I noted in Channing's writing is typical of Unitarian sermonizing. A. M. Baumgartner, in his essay "'The Lyceum Is My Pulpit'" describes the Unitarian ideal of preaching in the following terms; that the resulting sermons were non-confrontational and bland (but comforting to wealthy Bostonians) is hardly surprizing. Unitarian sermons were intended to give common subjects a fresh treatment, attempt to apply their exhortations to the needs of particular persons, never be negative, exhort the listeners to good actions, emphasize persuasion over proof, and end on time.[23] A preacher who succeeded in all of these could be fairly confident of never giving offence; to what could anyone object in such a cautious approach (apart, I suppose, from its very caution, which was, in fact, what many did object to).

Clearly, the Unitarian sermon differs radically from the long, Biblically based sermons of the Puritans, with their passionately expressed concern for the souls of

their congregants. As Lawrence Buell points out in *Literary Transcendentalism*, the Unitarians

> . . . largely discarded the old-fashioned sermon structure of text-doctrine-application, which prevailed through the eighteenth century . . . . This scheme was suited to sermons which based their practical morality solidly upon dogma, but for a preacher to whom religion was mostly a matter of moral guidelines, the method was inappropriate. All the nineteenth-century Harvard professors of rhetoric, therefore, taught that "in point of form [the sermon] is precisely the same as the demonstrative oration," and the ministers they trained almost universally complied.[24]

In doing this, the Unitarians were simply introducing the eighteenth century neoclassical sermon, which, as described by Rolf Lessenich in *Elements of Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth Century England*, aimed to achieve "the improvement of mankind":

> This was the acknowledged end of neoclassic preaching in an age of optimism, when the perfection of human nature by moral instruction had begun to seem possible, and when Christianity appeared to be a system of moral precepts rather than one of doctrinal beliefs. [The purpose of a neoclassic sermon] was first to convince the reason and then to engage the passions of its hearers or readers, to make them act according to their philosophical and theological insight.[25]

As both Lessenich and Buell point out, in the interests of inculcating the precepts of common sense morality through their sermons, the text of the sermon became of increasingly less importance. Emerson was eventually to describe the text as a hat, the article of clothing one selects last; certainly his texts make only one appearance, at the head of each sermon. Lessenich gives two broad categories of sermons, the analytic (the text is primary) and the synthetic (the text is secondary).[26] What the Unitarians embraced was a type of synthetic sermon, the explicatory. In such a sermon, the text became merely the starting point for general application. The objective of such a sermon, in accordance with current psychological and rhetorical theory, was to bring its hearers to a certain state of mind. On August 31, 1827, Emerson wrote to his brother William:

> I am going to preach at Northampton for Mr. Hall, a few weeks. . . . I aspire always to the production of present effect, thinking that if I succeed in that I succeed wholly. In a strong present effect is a permanent impression. . . .[27]

Although the body of the sermon had to follow the dictates of polite neoclassical prose, the application and peroration could be in a higher, even a sublime style. The preacher himself must be sincere, since only what he truly felt could he effectively communicate. This represents a rather pragmatic approach to sincerity, but we will see that for Emerson the question of sincerity became one of supreme importance. His desire for it ultimately led to the end of his ministerial career.

From the beginning of his time in the ministry, two concerns alternately plagued and inspired Emerson: his search for a way to speak so as to influence his hearers profoundly, and his growing conviction of the power of the individual. What he needed, with more and more urgency, was a means of addressing and freeing the greatness that he believed indwelt each member of his audience. In a letter written slightly before the one to William I quoted above, Emerson wrote to his Aunt Mary Emerson:

> I preach half of every Sunday. When I attended church on the other half of a Sunday, and the image in the pulpit was all of clay, and not of tunable metal, I said to myself that if men would avoid that general language and general manner in which they strive to hide all that is peculiar, and would say only what was uppermost in their own minds, after their own individual manner, every man would be interesting. Every man is a new creation, can do something best, has some intellectual modes and forms, or a character the general result of all, such as no other agent in the universe has: if he would exhibit that, it must needs be engaging, must be a curious study to every inquisitive mind. But whatever properties a man of narrow intellect feels to be peculiar he studiously hides; he is ashamed or afraid of himself, and all his communications to men are unskillful plagiarisms from the common stock of thought and knowledge, and his is of course flat and tiresome.[28]

What Emerson aspired to he described in an early Journal, when, in 1820 at the age of 16, he envisioned:

> . . . a pulpit Orator . . . whose independence, as a man, in opinion and action is established; let him ascend the pulpit for the first time, not to please or displease the multitude, but to expound to them the words of the book and to waft their minds and devotions to heaven. . . .

> To expand their views of the sublime doctrines of the religion, he may embrace the universe and bring down the stars from their courses to do homage to their Creator. . . . Then when life and its frivolities is fastly flowing away from before them, and the spirit is absorbed in the play of its mightiest energies, and their eyes are on him and their hearts are in heaven, then let him discharge his fearful duty, then let him unfold the stupendous designs of celestial wisdom, and whilst admiration is speechless, let him minister to their unearthly wants. . . . Let him gain the tremendous eloquence which stirs men's souls, which turns the world upside down, but which loses all its filth and retains all its grandeur when consecrated to God.

This desire to "lead" his listeners "whithersoever he will"[29] fascinated Emerson. The power of the true orator was such that "[t]hundering and lightning are faint and tame descriptions of the course of astonishing eloquence."[30] In 1824, while enduring the (to him) miseries of school teaching, he confided to his Journal that he still

> . . . hoped to put on eloquence as a robe, and by goodness and zeal and the awfulness of Virtue to press and prevail over the false judgments, the rebel passions and corrupt habits of men.[31]

His early sermons, however, are singularly lacking in "thunderings and lightnings," and James Elliot Cabot, in his *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* writes that

> [w]hat strikes me in reading them over is first of all the absence of rhetoric. There is no attempt at the eloquence or magniloquence which was then

> in vogue, and of which Emerson in his earlier days had been a warm admirer. All this had long since lost its charm for him.[32]

Cabot spends several paragraphs trying to find something notable in Emerson's sermons; he concludes that their "tinge of conventionality" comes from their being read and not heard, that "their effect was immediate and personal, not to be detached from his presence."[33]

Perhaps so, and yet Cabot's praise of Emerson sounds remarkably like a description of the Christian orator Emerson reviled in his letter to Mary Emerson.

More and more, Emerson yearned for a venue in which he could speak "truth." Religious controversies he disdained. While recovering his health in St. Augustine, Florida, he wrote of his hope for

> . . . the hour which must arrive, in the progress of society, when disputed truths in theology will cease to demand the whole life and genius of ministers in their elucidation. Then the champions of the Cross will be able to turn from this ungrateful task . . . and come at last to the dear and lofty employment of pointing out the secret but affecting passages in the history of the soul.[34]

Emerson may have briefly taken refuge in conventional utterances (just how conventional was their content, we shall see), but the compromise failed to satisfy. In the early months of 1830 Emerson complained to his Journal that

> [t]opics are the masters of the preacher. He cannot often write in the way he deems best and most level with life. He is obliged to humour his mind in the choice and development of his subject. When

> the sermon is done he is aware that much of it is
> from the purpose, . . and altogether it is unworthy
> of his conception of a good sermon. . . . [35]

While in St. Augustine, struggling with his decision to enter the ministry, Emerson had asked himself:

> What hinders me from doing my will? I am
> perplexing myself with scruples that never entered
> the minds of thousands of persons, fellow-beings of
> mine who have lived and acted in similar circum-
> stances. Why should I embarrass my existence?
> Voluntarily give up this enjoyment of life . . . because
> of certain ideas, certain imaginations which occur to
> nobody else, or, if they occur, are defied? Who calls
> on me to be the solitary servant, or the victim rather,
> of what is called Conscience, when all my neighbours are
> absolved from its authority.

He continues by wondering whether Conscience and Virtue might not be like many other "prejudices" which "influenced" his "conduct when a child," and which he now "despise[s] and ridicule[s]." He decides:

> . . . it must be admitted that I am not certain that
> any of these [the evidences of Christianity] are true.
> The nature of God may be different from what is
> represented. I never beheld him. . . . This good which
> invites me now is visible and specific. I will at least
> embrace it this time by way of experiment, and if
> it is wrong, certainly God can in some manner
> signify his will in future. Moreover I will guard against

> any evil consequences resulting to others by the vigilence with which I conceal it.[36]

Obviously, this strategy was not one that could be sustained.

Fear of insincerity haunted Emerson because of his conviction that only by being fully in accord with the words he spoke could he have any influence on his audience or any hope of living and growing spiritually himself. More and more he became convinced that the source of authoritative preaching was the "truths of authority, . . . the perception of principles."[37] Only if the speaker's words were in harmony with a truth he sincerely accepted, could his words have any power. In a Journal entry a few months later, he declared that "[a] man is invincible, be his cause great or small, . . . whenever he expresses the simple truth. . . "[38] In "The Authority of Jesus" (a sermon Emerson gave nine times between 1830 and 1836), he takes as his text "He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). In describing Jesus' method of preaching, Emerson points to what became his method. The "merit of Jesus" was that

> . . . he does not reason at all. He proves nothing by argument.
>
> He simply asserts, on the ground of his divine commission. Every one of his declarations is a naked appeal to every man's consciousness whether the fact be so or not. Christianity could not be defended, if it looked to its author for a systematic account of its evidences arranged by the rules of logic.

Emerson recognizes that Christ's style was "simple," the "style of conversation." He asks (himself, surely, as much as his congregation), "how was it . . . that he spoke with an authority" absent in the words of others of higher birth and greater learning?

Christ's words have authority "because he taught truth, and the supreme kind of truth, (that which relates to man's moral nature)." And the rule that sums up all of

Christ's instructions is the injunction to "Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect." The authority of this truth depends on its being "living truth," that "he speaks it as he sees it," and not "at second hand . . . unconnected and useless." Further, the moral nature of this truth gives it authority, for, says Emerson,

> . . . there is a vital connexion between moral truth and right action, . . . where the truth is vividly seen, it leads directly to action, and when the actions are done, they lead directly to better knowledge, and so there is a constant reciprocal action of the opinions on the will . . . .

This moral authority depends on the existence of the "moral faculty," which responds instinctively to moral truth. The "tone of authority depends entirely on the "truths of authority":

> It is impossible to mimick it. It proceeds directly from the perception of great principles. It is powerful because truth always convinces, and people always know whether they have been convinced or not. There is therefore no artifice possible in dealing with truth. He that hath it in himself will move you. He will speak with authority. He that hath it not will labor with his rhetoric and his learning in vain.

Moreover,

> [w]hosoever, therefore, teaches this truth participates of its authority, whosoever speaks it out of a soul over which it has full dominion, must speak as a God unto men, for he utters the word of God.[39]

Channing, as we noted above, spoke modestly, only on his own authority. John Cotton spoke on behalf of the God he served, using, as much as was possible, the very words of God in the conviction that those words carried an authority beyond any he could choose. Emerson, however, believes that if he can speak words he truly believes, his words will acquire a power (he uses the word again and again in this sermon) that will be irresistible: if he speaks truths (he places no qualifications on what the truths can be, except to say that they will be recognized as such by those who hear them) of which he is personally convinced he will utter "the word of God." This rising conviction of the great power available to the orator who speaks sincerely (and of the absolute moral responsibility to do so) led directly to Emerson's decision to resign his secure position as one of Boston's rising young clergymen.

Various explanations have been given for Emerson's decision to resign from the pulpit of Second Church in Boston.[40] Cabot describes the most significant of these: Emerson's dissatisfaction with the specific doctrines he was expected to inculcate and his dislike of the pastoral aspect of his charge. He cites Emerson's often-quoted musing in his Journal:

> It is the best part of the man, I sometimes think, that revolts most against his being a minister. His good revolts from official goodness. If he never spoke or acted but with the full consent of his understanding, if the whole man acted always, how powerful would be every act and every word. Well then, or ill then, how much power he sacrifices by conforming himself to say and do in other folks' time instead of in his own! The difficulty is that we do not make a world of our own, but fall into institutions already made.[41]

I will later discuss the consequences of Emerson's notion that one's relationship with existing cultural institutions constitutes a "fall." Here, however, I want to propose that Emerson resigned his pastorate because of what he believed to be an issue of spiritual life and death. If he continued to accept an authority he questioned, to accept any authority except that of his own reason, he would sacrifice all "power." His utterances would be devoid of any authority, mere tinklings empty of any meaning. In the years of his ministry, he had become convinced of the perfection of the individual, so much so that he was willing to accept his self as the touchstone of all truth, the source of all authority. Perfection ceased to be a quality towards which one should strive using all the means made available by church and nature. Once Emerson became convinced that each person was a part of God, it became inevitable that he should be able to turn his back on all the cultural institutions that traditionally had been used to cultivate the individual. Education, revelation, the church: all became unnecessary and even impediments to the soul seeking to find its indwelling God. When Emerson gave as his reason for abandoning the pulpit his objections to administering communion, he was not being insincere. He could no longer take communion because, at bottom, "[t]his mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me."[42] Emerson could no longer engage in forms imposed from without.

In an entry in his Journal dated March 13, 1831, Emerson discussed the question of the Holy Spirit in terms exactly parallel to those he later brought to bear on the commemoration of the Last Supper. In that entry, he insisted on the "uniformity and universality of spiritual influence." By this he meant that "[e]very word of truth that is spoken by man's lips is from God." He realized that

> . . . many will not fail to say; . . . . Why unsettle or disturb a faith which presents to many minds a helpful medium by which they approach the idea of God?
>
> And this question I will meet. It is because I think the popular views of this principle are per-

> nicious, because it does put a medium, because it
> removes the idea of God from the mind.[43]

A few months later he described his position more accurately. Self distrust he now terms "suicidal." He continues:

> To think is to receive. . . . To reflect is to receive
> truth immediately from God without any medium.
> That is living faith. To take on trust certain facts
> is a dead faith, inoperative. A trust in yourself is
> the height, not of pride, but of piety, an unwilling-
> ness to learn of any but God himself.[44]

Setting aside for the moment the incredible arrogance of being unwilling "to learn of any but God himself," we must recognize this as the central statement that it is. The rites of the Last Supper had become abhorrent to Emerson both because they represented a formal requirement to which he could not give his wholehearted assent and because they constituted an admission that an intermediary, Jesus Christ, was needed between God and man. The specific rites involved were indeed relatively trivial (to Emerson, at least); what they signified to him individually -- acquiesence in imposed forms -- had become for him an issue of the most pressing importance. But let's not dismiss the fact that the specific issue which proved the breaking point was the communion service. In my sixth chapter I will look at Hawthorne's critiques of Emersonian perfectibility; Hawthorne had the intelligence to recognize the costs to the individual and to society of Emerson's enterprise, and for him, communion represented the opposite: the willing participation of the individual in an act that recognized the mixed and imperfect nature of humankind. Emerson, however, only recognized the need to abandon the forms offered by his culture; for him, the needs of the individual were far more pressing than those of the community. Again, the issue was primarily one of empowerment. In the 1832 sermon, "Find Your Calling," Emerson urged each of his listeners (and, again, himself) not to rest "until every power of

his mind is in freedom and in action," to find his "high calling," which, when found and followed, will lead to "infinite glory and joy and sweetness."[45]

Once Emerson left the ministry, he was free to develop his own powers, his own means of self-expression, his own thoughts, without the need to defer to any authority other than that of his own convictions. He was free to go far beyond the Unitarian confidence in the value and benefits of self-cultivation -- he could urge upon his eager hearers his growing belief in the power of the self-reliant individual. One sermon in particular is pivotal to Emerson's thought on this question of the perfectibility of the individual; he called it "The Genuine Man." It was the last sermon he preached as pastor of Second Church; he liked it so well that he preached it thirteen more times in the next five years.[46]

The sermon has two texts; these are "Stand therefore having your loins girt about with truth" (Ephesians 6: 14) and "The new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness "(Ephesians 4: 24). Emerson begins by declaring that the task given "by Providence" to his generation is "the higher and holier work of forming men, true and entire men." Previous generations have "invented useful and elegant arts, ... have reared grand temples. . . . have bred great kings . . . have produced ingenious artists, inspired poets, eloquent orators, wise judges, brave soldiers, rich merchants, benevolent benefactors, learned scholars."[47] But the task of "forming men " surpasses any of these achievements. The genuine man is a "truth speaker," one through whom Reason speaks. Throughout this sermon, Emerson does or does not capitalize "reason" on no grounds that I can discern. Whether "reason" or "Reason," however, it corresponds to the moral sense, a sort of universalized conscience: "[T]his supreme universal reason in your mind . . . is not yours or mine or any man's, but is the Spirit of God in us all."[48] The genuine man is one whose words and actions are in perfect accord with "the Spirit of God" in him. Utterly secure in this conviction,

> . . . it is in the power of a man to cast off from him-

> self the responsibility of his words and actions and to make God responsible for him. It is beautiful, it is venerable to see the majesty which belongs to the man who leans directly upon a principle. He has a confidence that it cannot fail him. . . . Whilst he rests upon it, he has nothing to do with consequences; he is above them, he has nothing to do with the effect of his example; he is following God's finger and cannot go astray. God will take care of the issues. He may walk in the frailty of the flesh with the firm step of an archangel.[49]

This does sound irresponsible, and I think, in spite of the qualifications, Emerson's exuberance is indeed dangerous. Although Emerson does go on to insist that "this truth of character is identical with a religious life,"[50] he does not provide any tests, any means other than his own (undoubtedly well-founded) conviction of the rectitude of his inner man. In his peroration he advises his congregation to "[c]ommune with your own heart that you may learn what it means to be true to yourself and follow that guidance steadily."[51]

Earlier in the sermon, Emerson had explained what being true to one's self ought to mean. He recognizes

> two ways of speaking of self; one, when we speak of a man's low and partial self, as when he is said to be selfish; and the other when we speak of the whole self, that which comprehends a man's whole being, of that self of which Jesus said, What can a man give in exchange for his soul?[52]

This "whole self" Emerson subsequently (in the next paragraph) refers to as "this higher self." It would be the self purged of all imperfections (which are incidental) so that only the true (the genuine) self remains.

In suggesting that, incidental imperfections aside, each of us is in essence a god, Emerson isn't, in a sense, going too much beyond Channing. Where the two part company is in the exuberance of Emerson's language and in the apparent ease with which he expects the apotheosis to take place. Unitarians in general, as Daniel Walker Howe has shown us (in *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*), taught that for the soul to achieve its full potential a life of constant discipline was essential. Life was seen as a place and time of preparation for the fulfillment that would come after death. Consequently, "the Christian should renounce earthly ambitions and fix his affections where true joys were to be found -- in the next world."[53] Not, Howe notes with some acidity, that the leaders of the Unitarian movement denied themselves any of the earthly pleasures they could afford. Rather than embrace suffering, rather than practice anything that we would recognize as self-denial, they concentrated on the need for work. All in all, as Howe points out, it was an ethic that appealed to hard-working, prosperous Boston merchants, eager to sample the fine things their success made available. That Emerson accepted the Unitarian emphasis on effort is undeniable; the following passage from "The Genuine Man" is typical in its urgent plea that only in meaningful work can the religious character have its fullest expression:

> If . . . he worked with love in his favorite
> calling; if he saw in every day's labor, that he
> was thereby growing more skillful and more wise;
> that he was cooperating with God in his own
> education so that every dollar he earned was a
> medal of so much real power, the fruit and the
> means of so much real goodness; if neither his

> working hours nor his rest were lost time, but
> all was helping him onward, would not his
> heart sing for joy -- would not the day be brighter
> and even the night light about him -- would not
> company be more pleasant and even solitude be
> sociable and his life reveal a new heaven and a
> new earth to his purer eyes?[54]

As it did for the Puritans, real work, meaningful work, possesses an extraordinary power, since every action one takes is either furthering one's spiritual and moral development or hindering it. But, perhaps because of his desire to motivate, to uplift, to encourage his parishioners, Emerson rarely connects passages urging self-discipline with his loftiest and most unqualified expressions of the infinite potential of the human soul.

Emerson's view of the connection between the purified soul, the genuine man and God has direct connections with what he hoped to achieve through eloquence. In a sermon given in two parts on the Sunday after his ordination (in March 1829) Emerson discussed "The Christian Minister." In one of the opening paragraphs of "Part I" Emerson assures his "brethren" that if they "can conceive the feeling that animated [the words of] Paul, it is easy to adopt the language of Paul."[55] Words in themselves are nothing -- mere marks on a page -- unless we can, somehow, tap into the feelings that originally caused the words to be said. Emerson continues, a few paragraphs later (while discussing the Christian minister as a preacher) by saying that "The mightiest engine which God has put into the hands of man to move men is eloquence." He continues:

> When great sentiments call [eloquence] out from
> a great mind and especially when it rises to topics
> of eternal interest, it is glorious to see how it
> masters the mind, how it bows the independence of
> a thousand to the reason of one; how it goes on

> with electrical swiftness from unobserved beginnings,
> lifting him that speaks and them that hear, above
> the dust and smoke of life, searching out every
> noble purpose, every sublime hope that lurks in
> the soul. Then is that sympathy lofty and pure;
> then the speaker and the hearer become the pipes
> on which a higher power speaketh. It is like the
> breath of the Almighty moving on the deep.[56]

Once again, power is the evidence of the speaker's success. But this power is his as the result of all loss of self, as the speaker, together with the hearer, "become the pipes on which a higher power speaketh." In the sermon "Trust Yourself" (first given in 1830), Emerson explains:

> How clear and strong is the language of a man
> speaking the truth in things concerning his
> ordinary business. . . . No ingenuity, no
> sophism that the learning or eloquence of a
> man would intrude in such a conversation
> could be any match to the force of their speech. . . .
> For when men converse on their pressing affairs
> they do not so much seem to speak as to become
> mere organs through which facts themselves speak. . . .
> They become, as it were, passive, and are merely
> the voice of things.[57]

Emerson firmly believes that truth is universal, that it has a power to assert itself so irresistibly that if and when it is spoken all will respond to it because of its prior existence in the soul of each hearer. The speaker and the listener will lose all individuality, become as one, united in their apprehension of the articulated truth. It is not at all unlike Cotton's

insistence that if Roger Williams (or any other heretic) disagreed with (his expression of) God's truth, such a one must be a willful sinner.

But Emerson goes beyond Cotton. Although he insists on the power of the truth to wrench agreement from the enraptured soul, he also (as in "Trust Yourself") seems to expect that this truth will inevitably vary from person to person, and that each of us has the awesome responsibility of finding and expressing his own truth:

> . . . every mind . . . has its own beauty and character and was never meant to resemble any other one and . . . that God pronounced it good after its own kind. Every man has his own voice, manner, eloquence, and, just as much, his own sort of love, and grief, and imagination, and action. . . . Let him scorn to imitate any being. Let him scorn to be a secondary man. Let him fully trust his own share of God's goodness, that if used to the uppermost, it will lead him on to a perfection which has no type yet in the universe, save only in the Divine Mind.[58]

Emerson seems to recognize that these are rather extravagant claims, and further on in the sermon, he insists that

> [i]t is important to observe that this self-reliance which grows out of the Scripture doctrine of the value of the soul is not inconsistent either with our duties to our fellow men or to God. Some will say, to press on a man the necessity of guiding himself only by the unaided light of his own understanding, and to shun as dangerous the imitation of other men seems inconsistent with the Scripture

> commandments that enjoin self-abasement and unlimited love to others, and also with our natural relations to other men who are older and wiser and better than we are. Certainly it is our duty to prefer another's good always to our own, and gratefully to borrow all the light of his understanding as far as it agrees with ours, but the duty is quite as plain the moment our own convictions of duty contradict another's, we ought to forsake his leading, let him be of what wisdom or condition he will, and without fear to follow our own.[59]

Two points need to be made here. First, this is precisely Emerson's method of scholarship -- take as evidence of the eternal truth of his idiosyncratic notions the fact that bits and pieces of these have existed in the past. Second, irresponsible as Emerson's injunctions to his audience may appear to be, it must be admitted that he does make one essential qualification. It is when "our own convictions of duty contradict another's" that we are to reject his "leading." Certainly this second point does limit the scope and perhaps the arrogance of Emerson's demand. And, as is so often the case in Emerson's sermons, we can again see that Emerson may have been speaking primarily to himself, as he struggled with his conflicting obligations: to be a responsible member of society, accepting his position as pastor of an important establishment church on the one hand; on the other to be "true to his own self," and thus to abandon what society and family would declare to be his duty. But Emerson doesn't give examples, doesn't offer us any means of knowing what precisely he means by "duty." Who is to say that it wasn't young Jimmy Gatz's God-given duty to re-create himself in the image of his "God," to perfect himself according to his own lights, by creating in himself "the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent."[60] At any rate, it was with these convictions that Emerson

decided to leave the ministry and to attempt to find an alternate pulpit in the lectern. The task he set himself was immense: he had not only to create his own way of earning a living, but also to find some way of speaking and writing that would enable his hearers to lose that disabling sense of self and participate with him in a glorious union with the God within. It was in his lectures and essays that the man who eschewed all influences sought (and succeeded in having) his greatest influence, and it is to these that we can now turn.

[1] Alexander Kern, "The Rise of Transcendentalism, 1815 - 1860," *Transitions in American Literary History*, ed. Harry Hayden Clark (Durham: Duke University Press, 1954) 309.

2 Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939) 1: 138.

[3] Emerson had referred to the sermon six months earlier:

> I heard Dr. Channing deliver a discourse upon Revelation as standing in comparison with Nature. I have heard no sermon approaching in excellence to this, since the Dudleian Lecture. The language was a transparent medium, conveying with the utmost distinctness the pictures in his mind to the mind of the hearers.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson 11 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1909] 1: 361 and 290.

[4] William E. Channing, *The Perfect Life, The Works of William E. Channing D. D.*, ed. William Henry Channing (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886) 927.

[5] Puritan Calvinists, of course, distrusted spontaneous conversions, emphasizing rather a slow and tested growth in grace.

[6] The metaphor is typical of English Romanticism; it is discussed in its Unitarian context by Lawrence Buell in *Literary Transcendentalism* and by David Robinson in *Apostle of Culture* .

[7] Channing 932.

[8] Channing 934.

[9] Channing 935.

[10] Channing 936.

[11] Channing 936 - 937.

[12] That Locke provided the theoretical basis necessary for the new politeness of the neo-classical New England sermon is hardly surprising; that Jonathan Edwards could have based his understanding of psychology and rhetoric on the *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* seems far more remarkable. In his *Essay* Locke includes a discussion of the nature of language. Words, he argues, are merely noises, there being no necessary connection between the sound the word makes and the thing or idea it signifies. That seems indisputable and not likely to lead to large consequences; however, he goes on to argue that words must be "fixed" to the things they arbitrarily represent; otherwise, "hagglings" will ensue, as endless and unprofitable arguments about the meanings of words take the place of discussion of substantive issues. Religious disputations in particular are notorious for their useless "hagglings" over the meanings of words; indeed the Civil War in England had recently been fought because of disputes that to Locke were based on insignificant semantics. If, however, meanings could be fixed to words, such disputes should be avoidable. That this line of thought should ultimately result in the precision and clarity for which neo-classical prose is justly known is obvious. But Locke also claimed that the "simple ideas" which could be expressed by properly used words would be like "hard pellets of experience." And here we can recognize a point of contact between Edwards and Locke. To Edwards, as Perry Miller has shown, the Christian orator must speak so that "words would immediately be registered on the senses not as noises but as ideas." Locke had argued that all knowledge is derived from sensory experience (there being no innate ideas); if words "annexed" to sensations were used to fullest advantage, they could indeed become as "hard pellets of experience," striking the ears of the hearer with the same force as though he were physically experiencing the ideas being discussed. Perry Miller, "The Rhetoric of Sensation,"*Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956) 167 - 183.

[13] Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805 - 1861* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970) 155.

[14] William Henry Channing, *Channing's Life* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1887) 32.

[15] Merrell R. Davis, "Emerson's 'Reason' and the Scottish Philosophers," *New England Quarterly* (1944) 209 - 228.

[16] Howe 55.

[17] Howe 46.

[18] Howe, "The Religion of the Heart," *Unitarian Conscience* 151 - 173.

[19] Channing 941. It is intriguing to note the similarities between this passage and the opening of Emerson's *Divinity School Address* :

> In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. . . . One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world in which our senses converge.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*, *Emerson's Complete Works* ed. J. Elliot Cabot, 11 vols. [1838; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1886] 1:119.

[20] St. Augustine, "De Doctrina Christiana," cited by W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: a Study of its Literary Aspects* (London: London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932) 93.

[21] Edward Tyrell Channing, "The Orator and His Times," *Lectures Read to the Seniors in Harvard College*, eds. Dorothy I. Anderson and Waldo W. Braden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) 21 - 22.

[22] Howe 163.

[23] A. M. Baumgartner, "'The Lyceum Is My Pulpit': Homiletics in Emerson's Early Lectures," *American Literature* XXXIV: 479 - 483.

[24] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 107 - 108.

[25] Rolf P. Lessenich, *Elements of Pulpit Oratory in Eighteenth Century England (1660 - 1800)* (Köln: Bohlau, 1972) 234.

[26] Lessenich 89.

[27] Emerson, James Elliott Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 vols. (New York: Ams Press, 1965) 105.

[28] Emerson, Cabot 1: 133.

[29] Emerson, *The Journals*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1909) 1: 14 - 15.

[30] Emerson, *Journals* 1: 69.

[31] Emerson, *Journals* 1: 367.

[32] Cabot 1: 151.

[33] Cabot 1: 153.

[34] Emerson, Cabot 1: 125.

[35] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 294.

[36] Emerson, *Journals*, 2: 157 - 160.

[37] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 297.

[38] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 311.

[39] Emerson, *Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 3 vols. (n.p. University of Missouri Press, 1989) 1:192 - 195.

[40] Stephen Whicher describes an intellectual - religious crisis (in *Freedom and Fate)*; David Robinson comments on Emerson's distaste for the pastoral aspects of his ministry (in *Apostle of Culture*).

[41] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 448.

[42] Emerson, "The Lord's Supper," *Works* : 11: 24.

[43] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 359 - 360.

[44] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 409.

[45] Emerson, *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects*, ed. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938) 180.

[46].Emerson, McGiffert 186.

[47] Emerson, McGiffert 188.

[48] Emerson, McGiffert 188.

[49] Emerson, McGiffert 190.

[50] Emerson, McGiffert 182.

[51] Emerson, McGiffert 183.

[52] Emerson, McGiffert 183.

[53] Howe 159.

[54] Emerson, McGiffert 189.

[55] Emerson, *Sermons* 1:232.

[56] Emerson, *Sermons* 1:234.

[57] Emerson, *Sermons* 2: 265 - 266.

[58] Emerson, *Sermons* 2: 265.

[59] Emerson, *Sermons* 2: 266.

[60] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Collier Books, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1980) 99.

Chapter Four
Perfectibility in Early Emerson

The Emerson of the essays, both *First* and *Second Series* (1841 and 1844), is the Emerson known to most of us. Certainly it is from these essays that many of the aphorisms that constitute Emerson for the popular imagination come, and it is obviously these central works that informed Yvor Winters' impatient and contemptuous dismissals of the mystic Yankee and Quentin Anderson's more respectful (but still highly and exclusively adverse critical analysis. Each of these writers reacts to Emerson as virtually no one since Andrews Norton has done -- although I will suggest, in my final chapter, that their criticisms were anticipated by Hawthorne, who not only possessed the imaginative intelligence necessary for such analyses, but also had available to him the necessary imaginative forms. In his fictions he could explore the human consequences of actions based on Emersonian principles. Before turning to Winters' and Anderson's criticisms, we need to look at Emerson's central statements; these have their roots in the lecture series of the 30s and their formal expression in *Nature* (1836), "The American Scholar" (1837), "The Divinity School Address" (1838), and the collected essays of the early 1840s.

The lectures were, of course, Emerson's answer to his vocational problem: having abandoned the pulpit, he needed both a new forum in which to speak and a new source of income. The rising popularity of public lectures (discussed at length by Carl Bode in *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind*) coincided with his needs, and from 1833 to the end of his career Emerson's primary occupation was that of lecturer. David Mead's study of lecturers working in the American mid-west (*Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum 1850 - 1870)* gives intriguing and often amusing glimpses of Emerson's forays into the west. Henry James imaginatively appreciated the spectacle: "Certainly never was the fine wine of philosophy carried to remoter or greener corners."[1] Mead quotes extensively from reviews of Emerson's lectures in various Western cities. The response varied from polite bemusement to caricature; one member of Emerson's audience responded to a "Conduct of Life" lecture read in Columbus, Ohio by

sending to the editor of the *Ohio State Journal* an essay written by "a friend." Even after he had studied Emerson's essays "'with the utmost care,'" it remained "utterly impossible to catch the secret of that wonderful style which stands so entirely alone in its capacity for obscuring thought." The essay was entitled "How to Live Properly"; here is its second paragraph:

> It is one of the maxims of Burram pooter Bog, the Hindoo Mounshee, that truth is frequently the opposite of falsehood,--and Lord Bacon says "if you wish to make me angry, don't strike my nose with a brickbat, but tweak it gently with thumb and fore-finger." And Schiller says that the invention of gun-powder is hidden in the silence of the Dark Ages--yet nothing has made more noise in the world. Two and two make four, and a right angle may be produced as well by a perpendicular and horizontal, as by a hori-zontal and perpendicular.[2]

This isn't entirely fair, and there are better parodies (by, for example, Orestes Brownson and Edgar Allan Poe[3]); it does, however, give a sense of the lack of veneration with which some westerners dared to greet the Yankee mystic. To be just, we must recognize that it wasn't only Emerson's western audiences that were bemused by the Yankee sage; William J. Sowder, in *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada,* has shown that some members of Emerson's British audiences also found themselves in an intellectual fog.[4]

But varied as were the reactions to Emerson, his popularity as a lecturer is undeniable. Those lectures that can be deciphered (those composed in the 30s and 40s) have been collected and published fairly recently (between 1961 and 1972) but commented upon only slightly, primarily in David Robinson's excellent study *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer*. Since most of what is significant in the lectures is

repeated in the essays (and can be found in an even earlier form in the Journals), this relative lack of interest and of scholarly and critical activity is understandable. These early lectures do serve one useful function: although their content becomes increasingly Transcendental, they do express in relatively clear prose (the neoclassical goals of Emerson's Harvard instruction are still, to some extent, being served) the development of Emerson's most pressing concerns: self-reliance, the over-soul, compensation and correspondence. All of these are connected with Emerson's concern with perfection; it is with this connection in mind that I will discuss the lectures.

The titles of the lectures reveal an increasing abstraction and confidence as the years go by. In 1833, Emerson gave four lectures on "Science" (these contain much of the material later published as *Nature* [1836]), followed by a series on famous men ("Biography" [1835]) and a survey course on "English Literature" [1835 - 36]). But by the 40s, he was confidently speaking on "Human Life" [1838 - 39] and "The Present Age" [1839 - 40]). The shift in topics also reflects Emerson's increasing independence; after the series on "English Literature," Emerson became his own manager and assumed complete control of his lecturing.[5] Having found the restrictions imposed by the various societies and lyceums too limiting, he decided to take charge of all aspects of his lecturering. The brief introduction to the second volume of lectures includes an illuminating glimpse of the Yankee at work:

> The combination of Yankee practicality and no less Yankee idealism that has often been noted in Emerson marks this undertaking also. Each winter lecture series was a completely businesslike undertaking, entered upon in the first instance as a means of needed income. He hired the hall himself . . . wrote and paid for the advertising in three newspapers, sold tickets . . ., and after each series carefully tallied the

> net receipts. These he increased by repeating all or part of a series in other . . . towns . . .. If, as he once wrote, his journals were his savings bank, his lecture series were his capital investment . . . . [6]

I remarked above that the lectures are written in a conventional manner. This is particularly true of the earlier series. Certainly they are clearly constructed; their introductions are courteously invitational, and Emerson's tone is usually modest and often apologetic. He begins his lecture entitled "On Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature" "I confess, Gentlemen, . . ." The following is from the beginning of the first lecture in the "Biography" series:

> In considering a life dedicated to the study of Beauty it is natural to inquire, What is Beauty? Is this charming element capable of being so abstracted by the human mind as to become a distinct and permanent object?
>
> I answer, Beauty cannot be defined.[7]

William Ellery Channing also often used series of rhetorical questions to introduce the theses of his sermons and addresses. In an essay written shortly after the publication of the first volume of the lectures, and to which I have already referred ("The Lyceum Is My Pulpit: Homiletics in Emerson's Early Lectures"), A. M. Baumgartner argues that Emerson's early lectures follow the "rhetorical methods . . . discussed by Blair."[8] He remarks upon Emerson's use of common subjects given "fresh and vigorous treatment"; his attention to individual members of the audience (Baumgartner offers no evidence); his emphasis on moral persuasion; his positive approach; his concern for finishing on time; and (oddly) his refusal to "force into an artificial logical pattern the concepts which he wished to convey to his listeners."[9] Baumgartner connects this last to Blair by noting that in his *Rhetoric* Blair warns that "'to be an accurate reasoner will be small praise if he [the

preacher] be not a persuasive speaker also.'"[10] This connection seems dubious at best; and certainly, although I recognize the conventionality of the early lectures, Emerson himself was struggling to free himself from what he regarded as the stultifying limitations of rhetorical correctness.

In the lecture from which I quoted above, "On Inspiring a Correct Taste in English Literature," Emerson exhorts his listeners to

> [a]ccustom the pupil to a solitude not of place but of thought. Entirely wean him from traditionary judgment. And will you not save him wholly [from] that barren season of discipline which young men spend with the Aikens and Ketts and Drakes and Blairs acquiring the false doctrine that there is something arbitrary or conventional in letters, something else in style than the transparent medium through which I should see new and good thoughts?[11]

Oddly enough, one of the passages Baumgartner quotes to illustrate the connections between Emerson and Blair is taken from a section in "The Naturalist" (in the lecture series "Nature") in which Emerson is struggling to find a rationale for a new style; he writes:

> Composition is more important than the elegance of individual forms. Every artist knows that beyond its own beauty the object has an additional grace from relation to surrounding objects. The most elegant shell in your cabinet does not produce such effect on the eye as the contrast and combination of a group of ordinary sea shells lying together wet upon the beach. . .. I learned that Composition was more important than the beauty of individual forms

to effect.[12]

Emerson is led to this conclusion by his experience of placing a shell in a cabinet and discovering it to lose the beauty it had when on the beach. He tells the same story in a lecture a few years later on "Shakspear;" here he goes further:

> . . . Composition, i.e. putting together. . .. is more important than the elegance of individual forms. . . . The orator who astonishes . . . is nowise equal to the sudden creation upon a new subject of the brilliant chain of sentiments, facts, and illustrations whereby he now fires himself and you. Every link in this living chain he found separate: one ten years ago; one last week. . .. [Thus a poem is made] that shall thrill the world by the mere juxtaposition and interaction of lines and sentences. . .. [13]

Formal oratory pales beside the power of spontaneous utterance, properly arranged. Art is essential, but the hand of the artist must be hidden, so that the power of the utterance is not obscured. The parallels with Puritan rhetorical theory are compelling. This power is made possible, as we have seen, because in these sentences, each of which represents a moment of insight, the speaker is sincere. It is perfectly legitimate for him to record his moments of vision -- speech may become writing -- he is still speaking truth.

In a discussion of compensation in the lecture "Duty" (in "Human Life") Emerson claims that "All nature is an illustration of the moral sentiment." He continues:

> Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the very flower of the pleasure that conceals it. Cause and effect; means and ends; seed and fruit; cannot be severed for the effect already blooms in the cause; and the end preexists in the means; the fruit in the

seed.

This directly affects composition:

> Every opinion reacts on him who utters it. . .. it is a harpoon thrown at the whale and if the harpoon is not good or not well thrown it will go nigh to cut the steersman in twain or sink the boat.

Thus, to speak casually, without concern for truth, is dangerous and contrary to self interest. This isn't quite the piercing arrow of the Puritans, although the confidence in the power of the spoken word is the same. But God's arrows didn't pose the same threat to the speaker as do Emerson's harpoons -- the Puritan speaker had, of course, to search his heart and conscience before speaking, but he was spared both the burden of originality and the need to speak one's own truth: God's truth was sufficient. Of course, for Emerson, the end of a composition was similar to that desired by the Puritan preachers; it was to awaken an audience from a state of moral turpitude:

> [t]he effect of any composition is mathematically measurable by its depth of thought. . .. If it awaken you to think, if it lift you from your feet with the great voice of eloquence, then the effect is to be wide, slow, permanent, over the minds of men; if the pages instruct you not, they will die like flies in an hour.[14]

Emerson was eventually to formulate this even more forcefully, claiming to abandon the need for instruction in favour of provocation:

> Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth [of the moral sentiment] cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition. It cannot be

> received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is
> not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive
> from another soul.[15]

Here the two, instruction and provocation, are one. He fails, however, to provide the formula for calculating either the effect or depth of such compositions.

The goal of composition, then, is to string together[16] sentences that represent moments when the individual speaker has himself been in contact with Truth. Emerson describes the process in his lecture "The Head," the third in the series "Human Culture." To those who wish to cultivate their intellect, Emerson urges that they "sit alone" and "keep a journal," in which to record "the visits of Truth to [one's] mind."[17] It is typical of Emerson that he could variously refer to his Journals as a saving's bank and as a place in which he faithfully wrote down the thoughts that resulted from "the visits of Truth to [his] mind." Be that as it may, this does give us a clear glimpse into Emerson's method of composition and its motivation. By more or less stringing together the gems left after Truth's visits, he could ensure a compositon which consisted almost entirely of sincere sentences. This does not, I should add, make Emerson simply a practitioner of romantic associationism -- not, at least, in his prose. On the contrary, he firmly believed that his "beads" represented specific insights granted to him by the Over-soul, and that the value and strength of literary compositions depended on the extent to which such works separate "for us a truth from our unconscious reason, and [make] it an object of consciousness."[18] The writer is then the one who arranges (not the one for whom associative "arrangement" has previously occurred) his insights in such a way as to make them available to his readers; the more startling their collation, the more attention will be paid to each one of them.

The concern for sincerity, the desire to circumvent the necessarily limiting constraints of art(ifice) -- his attitude to these issues do place Emerson firmly in the

Romantic movement. Lawrence Buell in *Literary Transcendentalism* comments on the solution reached by the Transcendentalists:

> Fortunately the problem implied its own solution, namely an expressivist-didactic form of art in which one's thought or experience or perception was uttered and regulated as deftly as possible but was still the dominant element. At best . . . the result [of the artist's effort] would have the roundness of a masterpiece as well as the authenticity of truth. If not, it would at least be heartfelt ; . . it would be emancipated from the kind of triviality which the Transcendentalists disparaged. . .. [19]

It is, I think, worth noting that Emerson at least approached the need for these visits of truth in a fairly pragmatic manner. They could be prepared for, he explained in his lecture on "The Head," by the expedient of "sitting alone occasionally to explore what facts of moment lie in the memory." This may be time well invested; it

> . . . may have the effect in some more favored hour to open to the student the kingdom of spiritual nature. He may become aware that there around him roll new at this moment . . . the waters of Life; that the world he has lived in so heedless, so gross, is illumined with meaning.[20]

The method may be modest, but the result is, ultimately, empowerment; having recognized the "magical" nature of "every fact," the student will realize that "he is the heir of it all." However firmly Emerson may have believed that such moments of illumination have nothing to do with egotistic individualism, his assertions of possession -- ("[T]he universe

is the property of every individual in it"; "Know then that the world exists for you."[21]) will always be what his readers remember. In this lecture, the central passage arguing against mere selfish egotism occurs early on; the statement I quoted offering the individual the world occurs in the hortatory peroration. If Emerson's style had (and has) the effect he sought, and given the order of a typical Emerson lecture, the auditor's memory of such cautions would almost certainly be overwhelmed by the irresistible siren call of the conclusion.

We, however, can circumvent the force of Emerson's eloquence, and I will quote the relevant cautionary section. Emerson has just explained that children, being "pervaded by the element of reason" are uncontaminated by individualization: their "selves" remain "genuine," untouched by the selfish egotism that mars adults. But as the child

> . . . becomes man he enters from below upward into
> the great and absolute nature . . . whose property it
> is to be Cause . . . and through all his being . . . bursts
> the first surge of that ocean and he affirms *I am*, he
> speaks *I*. Only Cause can say *I*. Effect pointeth
> always at *Him*, the cause. But with infinite good
> comes its shadow, infinite ill. . .. [T]he youth . . .
> transfers this *me* from that which it really is,
> from the sublime soul within him, from pure
> Truth and pure Love, to the frontier region of
> effects in which he dwells, and place and time,
> to the fugitive and fleeting effects which have
> no real being when once that divine wave of
> Truth which they incrust has ebbed.[22]

The "sublime soul within," the true "me," ought to be in connection with Reason, Truth, Love, God, the Oversoul, and ought not to be individuated -- although elsewhere, Emerson claims that the soul in touch with this universal mind will be *more* distinct:

> It seems to be true that the more exclusively idiosyncratic a man is, the more general and infinite he is, which, though it may not be a very intelligible expression, means, I hope, something intelligible. In listening more intently to our own reason, we are not becoming in the ordinary sense more selfish, but are departing more from what is small, and falling back on truth itself, and God. For it is when a man does not listen to himself, but to others, that he is depraved and misled.[23]

This passage is taken from Emerson's Journal in 1830; two days later he wrote that "[a] man is invincible . . . whenever he expresses the simple truth," and then connects this truth and its accompanying power to "the talk of common people in common affairs."[24] Thus to achieve a style that could express truth, empowering the speaker and connecting both speaker and hearer through their shared apprehension of the truths of the universal mind, the orator has to adopt, in Wordsworth's words, the language of "men uttered in real life,"[25]a non-specialist language of persons speaking their deepest convictions. This language will speak compellingly to all who truly "hear" it. If the words do represent the universal "truth" then its auditors will inevitably be swept into agreement. The formulation is logical: if one records the products of moments of genuine insight, what one records will be de-individuated, cleansed of anything merely personal. Proof of the universality of such assertions will be their acceptance by those who respond as they ought. Logical as it may be, it remains an odd position for the prophet of self-reliance. After all, Emerson himself

denied the universality of many previously received truths; on what grounds could he possibly expect *his* truths to be accepted?

Emerson had been years in developing the oracular style that he begins to use in the lectures. The courteous transitions one expects in neoclassical prose and the attention to the movement of an argument (still present, at least at the level of the gesture, in the early lectures) begin to disappear. What remains are, increasingly, pieces of writing from which most of the expected elements of argumentation are absent. The lectures have various titles but one subject -- or, looked at another way, one subject recurring in a number of contexts. As I noted above, some of the trappings of conventional discourse remain, but more and more throughout the lectures Emerson substitutes strings of assertions and illustrations for formal persuasive argumentation. His subject is the highest he could conceive of: the reality, nature and purpose of Truth, Reason or Over-soul. The lectures may have different titles, but one theme dominates each: how the individual is to relate to that universal force. Having abandoned the pulpit, the need to exhort and to speak on the most exalted subject available to him continued to motivate him. The highest form of writing, he had long thought, was moral in nature, and his essays certainly fit well into the tradition of moral essayists. As Lawrence Buell notes, the moral essay is "a short, unsystematic meditation on a given abstract issue, often marked by curtness, lack of transition, and aphoristic statement."[26] Loose as Buell's definition is, it precisely describes Emerson's lectures and early essays. Because of their close connection with the Journals, the essays can be seen as heuristic in nature, as records of Emerson's attempts to display what he was convinced was the central truth of life. That truth, the power of the soul through its connections to the Oversoul, is of course related to our concern with perfectibility.

Of particular interest in this regard is a series of ten lectures from which I have already quoted; those on "Human Culture," given in Boston in 1837 - 38. The lectures are arranged in an ascending order; the introductory lecture is followed by one on

the effects of culture on work ("Doctrine of the Hands"), on intellectual activity ("The Head"), and so on, culminating with two lectures on "Heroism" and "Holiness" and concluding with a lecture entitled "General Views." David Robinson has contributed an excellent study of the notion of culture in the work of Emerson; he argues convincingly that the basis of Emerson's understanding of the word "culture" is to be found in Unitarian theory. He cites Channing's *Self-Culture* (1838) in which the Unitarian belief in self-culture is defined:

> To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind,
> is to make it grow. Growth, expansion, is the end. Nothing
> admits culture but that which has a principle of life,
> capable of being expanded. He, therefore, who does what
> he can to unfold all his powers and capacities, especially
> his nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned,
> vigorous, excellent, happy being, practices self-culture.

As Robinson notes, this use of an organic metaphor in part simply shows that the Unitarians were indeed indebted to the English Romantics for many of their ideas. But, Robinson continues, "their direct application of the assumptions implicit in the metaphor to essential issues in American religious thought was unique."[27]
It shouldn't perhaps be surprising that the heirs of the Puritans should take a metaphor so literally and apply it with such earnest rigor.

Emerson wasn't, of course, the only lecturer in Boston in 1838. Several months after Emerson's final lecture in the "Human Culture" series, W. E. Channing introduced the Franklin Lectures with the address entitled "Self-Culture." It expresses ideas that Channing had formulated and promulgated elsewhere; these ideas were instrumental to Emerson as he formulated his beliefs, and as such Channing's address is pertinent to our enquiry. He begins it by insisting to his working class audience that "[r]eal

greatness has nothing to do with a man's sphere," with the accidents of birth or occupation. On the contrary, greatness is part of the very nature of man:

> Let us not disparage that nature which is common to all men; for no thought can measure its grandeur. It is the image of God, the image even of his infinity, for no limits can be set to its unfolding. He who possesses the divine powers of the soul is a great being . . .. [28]

Channing continues, in his usual leisurely pace, to unfold his subject; he eventually explains his choice of subject:

> I have chosen for the subject of this lecture Self-culture, or the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature.[29]

The lecture itself he regards as one of the available "means of instruction" which will enable him to stir up and rouse his audience, to urge and motivate them to embark on the program of self-cultivation he discusses. Channing regards the very power to act upon one's self as a "noble . . . fearful . . . as well as glorious endowment . . . . and a solemn duty."[30] Channing then discusses several attributes of self-culture; most importantly it is moral and religious. It is moral because it is disinterested and is connected to the inherent principle variously called "reason, . . conscience, . . the moral sense or faculty." Self-culture is also religious. Through it a power

> which cannot stop at what we see and handle, at what exists within the bounds of space and time, which seeks for the Infinite, Uncreated Cause, which cannot rest till it ascend to the Eternal, All-comprehending Mind. This we call the religious principle. . . . To develop this is to educate ourselves.[31]

Finally, self-culture is intellectual, social and practical. Intellectual self-culture ought always to be connected to moral cultivation, and occurs not so much through the accumulation of facts (an activity, Channing tells us, of the understanding) but through the development of "a force of thought which may be turned at will on any subjects on which we are called to pass judgment." It is social in that through it we develop our capacity to feel deeply and practical to the extent to which it "fit[s] us for action."[32] The means of achieving this self-culture are education, "control of the animal appetites,"[33] "intercourse with superior minds,"[34] labour, political activity, and (a topic too great for Channing to discuss) Christianity.

But in the midst of these conventional thoughts Channing includes a section on the need to "free ourselves from the power of human opinion and example, except as far as this is sanctioned by our own deliberate judgment." Channing continues:

> One of the chief arts of self-culture is to unite the
> child-like teachableness, which gratefully welcomes
> light from every human being who can give it, with
> manly resistance of opinions however current, of
> influence however generally revered, which
> do not approve themselves to our deliberate
> judgment.[35]

This would be excellent advice if one could be sure that none of its takers would confuse the times when "child-like teachableness" is appropriate with those when "manly resistence" is demanded.

H. B. Parkes comments on the temperament of Emerson and his contemporaries in terms that clarify the differences between their society and ours; it serves also to sharpen Anderson's points about the extent to which Emersonian provocations have been responsible for the deterioration of American culture:

> The whole of New England was permeated by

> a system of moral values; the function of all social organization was to cultivate them, and those persons who realized them most completely were honoured by their neighbors. For two centuries piety, self-control, devotion to learning and the public interest had been ideals; ministers, scholars and statesmen had been an aristocracy . . .. Emerson . . . accepted the New England morality without hesitation; it became so nearly nature in him that it never occurred to him to doubt it.[36]

Just as Emerson isn't remembered for his qualifications and cautions, we don't remember Channing for the more daring parts of his theology. But Parkes' remarks on Emerson remain apposite to Channing: both men practiced a morality, and enjoyed contact with a society while formulating a philosophy that could destroy it. That they were innocent of any such intent doesn't entirely absolve them; Emerson, on occasion, gives dramatic voice to critics (in "Circles," for example, as we will see) only to dismiss their warnings as irrelevent to his larger concerns.

Channing makes the further claim that in one particular area it is essential that no one bow to another's opinion:

> Especially if there springs up within you any view of God's word or universe, any sentiment or aspiration which seems to you of a higher order than what you meet abroad, give reverent heed to it; inquire into it earnestly, solemnly.

Channing warns the aspirant:

> Do not trust it blindly, for it may be an illusion,

> but it may be the Divinity moving within you,
> a new revelation, not supernatural,
> but still most precious, of truth or duty, and if,
> after inquiry, it so appear, then let no clamor,
> or scorn, or desertion turn you from it. Be true
> to your own highest convictions.

Channing, showing the extent to which he remains connected to orthodoxy, is careful to maintain the separation of God and the individual: it is the Divinity within one, not one's own self, and the revelation is not supernatural. Channing concludes this section by reflecting that

> A man in the common walks of life, who has faith
> in human perfection, in the unfolding of the
> human spirit, as the great purpose of God,
> possesses more the secret of the universe,
> perceives more the harmonies or mutual adapta-
> tions of the world without and the world within him,
> is a wiser interpreter of Providence, and reads
> nobler lessons of duty in the events which pass
> before him, than the profoundest philospher who
> wants this grand central truth.[37]

In this context, Emerson's claims, to which we will now turn, may appear less bizarre, and yet in one sense they are more so. Channing places this passage, as I have noted, in the middle of discussions of the need to acquire self-culture through the conventional means of education, connections to those we admire, moral rectitude and religion. If Emerson's style seems designed to emphasize his most extravagant claims and wildest assertions, Channing's has the effect of imposing sobriety on his most unorthodox suggestions.

To some extent, Emerson in "Human Culture" follows the traditional Unitarian understanding of the term, arguing that "[h]is own Culture, -- the unfolding of his nature, is the chief end of man."[38] He begins the first lecture ("Introductory"), however, by contrasting "the modern mind" with "former men." This contrast he develops more formally in the introductory lecture to "The Present Age" (1838-39), in which he describes the two "parties" (groups of people connected by broad philosophical assumptions and preconceptions): "the party of the Past and the party of the Future," or "the Movement Party [and] the Establishment."[39] In this earlier lecture, however, Emerson simply lists a few points of contrast between the modern and the former mind:

> The former men acted and spoke under the thought
> that a shining social prosperity was the aim of men,
> and compromised ever the individuals to the nation.
> The modern mind teaches (in extremes) that the
> nation exists for the individual; for the guardianship
> and education of every man.

The increasing importance of culture is part of this new way of thinking; in fact, "[t]he new view . . . has . . . no clearer name than *Culture* ."[40] Culture, then, is both the process and the product, both the means of unfolding the nature of the individual and the nature that is unfolded; it clearly places the needs of the individual ahead of those of the community. Emerson continues:

> Culture . . . does not consist in polishing and varnishing,
> but in so presenting the attractions of nature that the
> slumbering attributes of man may burst their sleep
> and rush into day. The effect of Culture on the man
> will not be like the trimming and turfing of gardens,
> but the educating the eye to the true harmony of the
> unshorn landscape, with horrid thickets, wide

> morasses, bald mountains, and the balance of the land and sea.[41]

Culture, then, is a particular form of *cultivation*, the process and techniques of awakening the individual to the power within -- unshorn and untamed. It is, however, also "that part of human nature . . . called the Ideal," or "the Perfect," and as such culture is both process and product.

The Perfect to which culture leads does not exist in the realm of the Actual and yet it is what we always yearn for; thus, the "enraptured" lover

> . . . is instantly sobered by observing that [his beloved's] living form detaches itself from the beautiful image in his mind. They never, never will unite and always in seeing her he must remark deficiency.[42]

This passage clearly expresses the threat to human relationships inherent in perfectionism. When the beloved (as is inevitable, and many would think even desireable) proves herself to be different from her lover's "beautiful image" of her, he forever after focusses on what Emerson here calls her deficiencies. Rather than connecting directly with the other, Emerson willingly accepts a potentially tragic relationship predicated on disappointment. This may seem like a philosophical justification for immaturity; it perfectly describes the problem of any relationship in which the other is used as an object and is accepted only to the extent that she corresponds to an ideal that she may well not herself admire. It precisely describes Gatsby's dilemma: "He knew that when he kissed [Daisy], and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God."[43] That is Nick's and Gatsby's view of the affair; what it felt like to be Daisy, incapable of responding appropriately to a passion and need she couldn't understand, isn't mentioned. Similarly, Emerson is exclusively concerned with his relationship to his own self -- that takes primacy over any (inevitably disappointing) other relationship. The

greatest need of the individual is to achieve perfection, regardless of the cost to those around him. I believe that Hawthorne challenges this aspect of Emersonian transcendentalism in "The Birthmark" (1843); I will return to it in my sixth chapter. Here we need merely note that this is one of the rare instances when Emerson recognizes that perfection simply cannot and never will exist in the here and now; and yet, he details what will be one consequence of such aspirations on intimate relationships in such a way as to indicate only his concern for the disappointment of the idealistic lover.

Culture empowers the individual, who, "[i]n the eye of the philospher, . . . has ceased to be regarded as a part, and has come to be regarded as a whole. He is the world."[44] All that he sees and does serves to increase his culture, because

> [h]e is so strangely related to everything that he
> can go nowhere without meeting objects which
> solicit his senses, and yield him new meanings.[45]

This intellectual relation to all things (in which all of creation yields its value and meaning to the Emersonian soul) is augmented by an equally all-encompassing active relation to the world:

> He can hew the tree and hammer the stone and
> sow the barren ground. That is to say, he is so
> related to the elements that they are his stock,
> flexible in his hands; he takes the obedient
> mountain and puts his own will into it and it
> becomes a city, temples, and towers.[46]

This isn't, perhaps, a relative the elements would wisely want, and Emerson offers the individual nothing more to guide him to a correct sense of proportion in this bewildering pan-ownership than his own mind. He assures his audience that "[t]he truth in the mind is a perfect measure of all things and the only measure." Emerson continues:

> I acknowledge that the mind is also a distorting

> medium so long as its aims are not pure. But the moment the individual declares his independence, takes his life into his own hand, and sets forth in quest of Culture, the love of truth is a sufficient gauge. It is very clear that he can have no other. What external standard, what authority can teach the paramount rank of truth and justice but the mind's own unvarying instinct?[47]

Channing's thought was restrained by his belief in the existence of a separate moral agent (God) to which the individual could and should refer himself; Emerson rarely recognizes any such authority, having a serene confidence in the power of the moral instinct to lead directly to the Ideal.

This is heady stuff, and later in the series Emerson turns his attention to more mundane matters. He admits the existence of "a world of facts and objects in which we are all compelled" to live and "in which we do not seek the beautiful nor the good but the profitable." But almost immediately he reasserts the primacy of the individual soul, defining Prudence not only as "the right order of external events" but also as "the operation of the central soul on the external world to bring it into conformity with the law of the mind."[48]True prudence recognizes the merely symbolic and utilitarian value of existence:

> But culture revealing to man the high origin of all this apparent world, Culture aiming ever at the perfection of the Man himself as the end, imperiously demands that conveniences of every sort, even health and bodily life, shall not be sought for themselves, but in a rigid subordination to the higher nature.[49]

Imperious in its nature, Emerson's Culture, as I will show in the next chapter, has little to connect it with two other prophets of culture, Coleridge and Arnold, both of whom offer ways of connecting the individual to his society, and don't demand a simultaneous apotheosis and denial of the self. As we will see, Coleridge develops the notions of culture and the clerisy; Arnold that of "the better self."

I have chosen to quote almost exclusively from two of Emerson's lectures on "Human Culture"; I could as easily have taken material from almost any other of the lectures in the second two volumes of *The Early Lectures*, in which these ideas are reformulated and repeated time and again. And they are, of course, restated in the essays of the 40s and 50s. It is my intention now to turn to the criticisms of Emerson raised by Winters and Anderson. What they have to say about Emerson is derived primarily from what I think could be called his central essay: "Self-Reliance." While I will agree with much of what Winters and Anderson have to say, I will also argue that Emerson was attempting to find a means of *connecting* the real to the ideal -- that for all his commitment to transcendence, to a doctrine of self-reliance that would sever all traditional connections of the individual to others, to society, even to his or her self, he was simultaneously searching for a way of establishing a meaningful dialogue between the individual and his culture. These moments of interconnection between the ideal and the real he describes as "transitions"; they are somewhat like incarnations: places or moments when the ineffable takes form and as such is made available as a *part* of actual life. Richard Poirier, in *The Renewal of Literature*, describes these moments in the following terms:

> Emerson says unabashedly in "Self-Reliance" that
> 'power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in
> the moment of transition from a past to a new
> state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to
> an aim . . . .' How do we experience a 'transition?'
> I suggest, tentatively, that it is like catching a

> glimpse of a thing before it is possible to recognize
> or name it, the moment just before it can be
> classified by language and thus become composed
> or reposed in a human corpus or text.[50]

I don't find Poirier's tentative description satisfying, although I fully sympathize with the difficulty in pinning down precisely what Emerson means by the term. The concept recurs from the lectures, through the essays, into *Representative Men*, but is never fully developed.

In a sense, of course, Emerson's desire to see the natural world as a hieroglyph, as an alphabet of symbols presenting to our senses the truths of a moral universe, is part and parcel of what I would point to as the significance of the term. Nature and language have this in common: they are both doubled-sided, they both have an actual and an ideal side. In his lecture on "Art," in the series "Philosophy of History," Emerson laments the fact that "in each of ["the Fine Arts"] there is much that is not spiritual." He recognizes that "[e]ach has a material basis" with the consequence that "in each the creating intellect is crippled in some degree by the stuff on which it works". But "[t]he basis of poetry is language, which is material *only on one side*. It is a demi-god."[51]. Language, because it is an abstraction capable of expressing or pointing to or signifying both concrete objects and abstract conceptions, partakes of two worlds simultaneously, and hence its unique power and value. Through its use, the Ideal and the actual can be momentarily united. In the lecture subsequent to this one, "Literature," Emerson went on to say that the form of all "genuine works" of literature have "two elements":

> . . . the peculiar genius of the poet; and the want of
> the times. The man of genius must occupy the whole
> space between God or pure mind, and the multitude of
> the uneducated men. He must draw from the infinite
> Reason on the one side and he must penetrate into

> the heart and mind of the rabble on the other. From one he must draw his strength: to the other, he must owe his aim. The one yokes him to the real; the other to the apparent. At one pole is Reason; at the other Common Sense.[52]

Here, Emerson seems to find a genuine value in the "apparent," although he does through his parallel structures equate Common Sense and the apparent with "the heart and mind of the rabble." The juxtaposition is unsettling (Emerson's contempt for the aggregate form of the common man always is), and yet the passage does emphasize the need for the artist to be able to *express* the ineffable.

In a much later lecture, again entitled "Literature," but now part of the series "The Present Age," and read in the early 40s, Emerson reworked much of this material but with rather different emphases. In this later lecture (it is in two parts), Emerson focusses on the need for the artist to abandon all vestiges of self, of personality, in order to lead us to the "Metaphysical Nature, to the invisible, awful facts, to moral abstractions." Thus,

> The more they draw us to them the farther from them or more independent of them we are, because they have brought us to the knowledge of somewhat deeper than both them and us.[53]

As is always the case with Emerson, he pushes a concept to its furthest extension. The connections between the Real and the actual have been, inevitably, transcended, and what finally matters is only the Real or the ideal. And surely what Emerson says here simply isn't true. Of course great writers aren't mere "personalities," in the sense that, say, royal riffraff will always and only be. But what Coleridge or Arnold wrote is inseparable from the reality of Coleridge and Arnold. What they wrote *isn't* a transciption of "somewhat deeper than both them and us." Certainly, it isn't "them" but rather their hard won understanding of their subjects, and what they wrote is often more heuristic than final, a

record of a process rather than a fiat handed down from on high. As such, when we read Coleridge or Arnold (or whomever) we as readers are interacting not with an inert text but with a living record of another being's thought.

If it sounds as though Emerson is merely urging the sensible critical principle of not mistaking the text for its author, consider this passage taken from further on in the lecture:

> . . . use your literature more impersonally. Strip it of this envious individuality. Take all that you call Dante, the whole mass of images, thoughts, emotions, facts, and believe what is certainly true, that it is not poorly confined to certain Florentine flesh and blood but that it is an eternal flower of the world, a state of thought indigenous in all souls because in the One Soul, a sign of your Zodiack, and so shall you in your progress learn that the deified Alighieri was only a type of the great class of [divine] shapes to which he led you, the book of a brute harp string which vibrating on your ear causes you to see God and his angels, and that you have a right not derived but original to all the pomp [of] real nature to which the name of Dante was a frontispiece."[54]

It's quite the sentence, and with it Emerson reveals once again what I find an unacceptable degree of indifference to the reality of the individual (Dante was "*only* a type") directly consequent upon his infatuation with the perfected Reality to which all that exists is merely antecedent.

In his essay "Plato" in *Representative Men*, Emerson seems once again to find a value for the partial and actual. He argues that individual maturity is reached when,

through cultivation, a person is able to see things "no longer in lumps and masses, but accurately distributed."[55] As with the individual, so with nations:

> There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness, and have not yet become microscopic, so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of Night, converses by his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation.[56]

Plato, Emerson argues, typifies this process. It is Plato who can bring together both the Unity of Oriental philosphy and the Diversity of Western or European thinking. In most of us, one or the other sort of thinking prevails; in Plato, however, "a balanced soul was born, perceptive of the two elements."[57] The following is Emerson's description of Plato; it sounds extraordinarily like a description of the prose Emerson yearned to write:

> The balanced soul came. If he loved abstract truth, he saved himself by propounding the most popular of all principles, the absolute good, which rules rulers, and judges the judge. If he made transcendental distinctions, he fortified himself by drawing all his illustrations from sources disdained by orators and polite conversers, from mares and puppies, from pitchers and soupladles, from cooks and criers, the shops of potters, horsedoctors, butchers, and fishmongers. He cannot forgive in himself a partiality, but is resolved that the two poles of thought shall appear in his statement. His argument and his sentence

> are selfpoised and spherical. The two poles appear, yes, and become two hands to grasp and appropriate their own.[58]

Emerson himself strove to develop a style that could include everything; he continues in his praise of Plato:

> Every great artist has been such by synthesis. Our strength is transitional, alternating, or shall I say, a thread of two strands. The seashore, sea seen from the shore . . . the experience of poetic creativity which is not found in staying at home nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible. . . . Plato keeps the two vases, one of aether and one of pigment, at his side, and invariably uses both.[59]

Plato's "warrant and qualification to be the world's interpreter" rests upon his "great commonsense"; he is able to "reconcile his poetry with the appearances of the world, and build a bridge from the streets of cities to the Atlantis."[60] In these passages, Emerson does seem to find reason to value the imperfect actual and to grasp ways in which it can be connected to the Ideal without being subsumed by the overwhelming Unity. But by the end of the essay, Emerson has, typically, risen above Plato's "two strands"; he admits that the defect of Plato comes from this very quality: he is "intellectual in his aim, and therefore in expression literary." Emerson continues:

> [H]is writings have not, what is no doubt incident to this regnancy of intellect in his work, the vital authority which the screams of prophets and the sermons of unlettered Arabs and Jews possess. There is an interval,

and, to cohesion, contact is necessary[61]

"Contact" results inevitably in the "vital authority" of the prophetic drowning all else: the value that Emerson occasionally proclaims for the common or the actual is always temporary and partial. With his eye on transcendent perfection, the value of anything other than the "genuine self" (which, as we have seen, exists as a subsumption of the self) is never secure. If the problem is one of finding a way to exist in two worlds without denying either, of recognizing and connecting the divine and the real, then Emerson fails. There remains the question of the relationship of the self-reliant individual to his community: how does the person in contact with perfection act *vis a vis* his society? And it is here that Winters and Anderson attack Emerson. David Robinson may think Emerson an "apostle of culture"; Winters and Anderson view him more as a cultural guerilla, as the well-meaning proponent of a system that has aided in, as Anderson puts it, "the American flight from culture."[62]

Neither Winters nor Anderson focusses his criticisms of Emerson specifically on the issue of perfectibility; however, it is relevent to both through its connections to self-reliance. Yvor Winters discusses Emerson on several occasions, most notably in essays on Jones Very and Hart Crane, both of which have been collected in *In Defense of Reason*. Quentin Anderson deals with Emerson in *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History*. In a strange way, Winters seems to have absorbed something of Emerson's method of argumentation: no one could doze through Winters' essays on Emerson; they don't merely provoke, they often infuriate. If any critic is self-reliant, it is Winters; if any is unafraid to speak his own truths, it is Winters; if any ready to follow his own conscience in the absence of any affirmation, again it is Winters. The similarities are, of course, unavoidable, but it isn't my intention to argue for the existence of bizarre connections between Emerson and Winters. Where Emerson sees identity (or the collapse into the Ideal of the actual) Winters sees separation: the individual seeks to govern his or her behaviour in accordance with moral absolutes. Both are by their

own assertion moral in their aim, yet Winters identifies himself as an absolutist and attacks Emerson as a relativist. Emerson, who sought always to lose the individual in the universal, might not have recognized himself in Winters' descriptions; we need to determine the extent to which Winters' portrait captures Emerson.

Yvor Winters detests Emerson, finding him to be not only fraudulent and sentimental,[63] but a very "limb of the Devil."[64] In his essay on Hart Crane, Winters makes the case that "the doctrine of Emerson . . . , if really put into practice, should naturally lead to suicide,"[65] as it did, according to Winters, in the case of Hart Crane. Winters on Emerson hasn't been taken very seriously; his comments are cited rarely and often with amusement. His arguments are put, as usual, cogently and with great vigor. In his essay on Jones Very's and Emerson's mysticism, Winters argues that while Very's was genuine and admirable;,Emerson's version of the same thing was merely fraudulent, self-indulgent, and contemptible. He claims that Emerson's

> . . . central doctrine is that of submission to emotion,
> which for the pantheist is a kind of divine instigation:
> an inadmissible doctrine, for it eliminates at a stroke
> both choice and the values that serve as a basis for
> choice, it substitutes for a doctrine of values a doctrine
> of equivalence, thus rendering man an automaton and
> paralyzing all genuine action. . .. [66]

Winters goes on to argue that Emerson "succeeded in focussing upon his romantic amoralism a national religious energy which had been generated by a doctrine and by circumstances now equally remote." In other words, Emerson (his ideas) became the focal point for powerful spiritual desires which were no longer being met by established churches. And Emerson's ideas were such that, although for himself they posed no moral problems (he was, after all, one of the most morally upright men one can imagine), "the acceptance of [his] doctrine produced a new spirit, foreign even to his own, or at least

acting in regions beyond his comprehension and in ways that would surely have troubled him."[67]

Some of what Winters says can be explained by reference to Emerson's style. His refusal to qualify, his love of shocking, both committed him to making statements that taken in themselves were indeed irresponsible. That they can sometimes be balanced by reference to larger contexts, to other essays, to earlier passages in the same essay, and so on, doesn't absolve Emerson of blame. He modelled his style, as we have seen, on that of Christ, who also made exaggerated and provocative statements, advising his followers to leave family and friends, to hate their parents, to forsake the letter of the law, to ignore Sabbath laws, and to recognize that the kingdom of God is within.[68] But Christ emphatically did *not* refer moral judgements to the individual conscience. On the contrary, he urged and expected his followers to be conversant with and subject to Mosaic law, only urging that the law be interpreted in a spirit of godly love -- a spirit he was at pains to define.[69] It is Emerson's failure to provide any such limits and guidelines that infuriates Winters, and I think he is right to be angered by Emerson. Emerson *does* tell his hearers to follow their instincts, that to do so will put them into contact with a (supposedly moral) universal force. But he offers no referents, absolutely no means of ensuring that one's instincts are worthy of being followed. "Trust yourself," he urges his audiences, "trust yourself and all power will be yours." He failed to imagine the possibility that the instincts of some persons are evil or perverted -- possibly because his concept of evil was as constitutionally weak as his concept of perfection was strong. In the essay on Crane, Winters cites the following passage from "Self-Reliance":

> I remember an answer which when quite young
> I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was
> wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of
> the church. On my saying, "What have I to do with
> the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?"

> my friend suggested,--"But these impulses may be
> from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not
> seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I
> will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to
> me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names
> very readily transferable to that or this; the only
> right is what is after my consitution; the only wrong
> what is against it.[70]

Even if we assume, with B. L. Packer, that the exchange in this passage is intended to be humorous,[71] we can't explain away the subsequent commentary. Unless Emerson has some safeguards for the formation of one's nature or character, what he is saying is dangerous in its possible applications.

This leads us back to the notion of perfectibility, specifically to the notion of culture as it applies to the development of character. It is, of course, possible that safeguards do exist in Emerson, that the process of cultivation can ensure that one's nature or character will be such as to render Emerson's imperatives benign. Ultimately, of course, it doesn't matter, since if cultivation is effective, it will result in all that is personal and individual in the personality being lost in a (Emerson assures us) moral Over-soul. But how does the individual function in the world? Emerson deals with this in essays with titles like "Prudence," "Heroism," and "Holiness"; it may well seem that no one could follow the edicts of these essays and act with anything but the highest rectitude. As is usual with Emerson, there is an unsettling tendency to connect prosperity with virtue (in this regard, at least, Emerson remained firmly Protestant); that aside, the focus of "Prudence" is on the pragmatism of moral behaviour:

> Thus truth, frankness, courage, love, humility
> and all the virtues range themselves on the side of
> prudence, or the art of securing a present well-being.

> . .. [B]egin where we will, we are pretty sure in a
> short space to be mumbling our ten commandments.[72]

"Pretty sure" probably wouldn't satisfy Winters, nor should it. It isn't for "Prudence" -- or for prudence -- (he begins the essay by admitting that he writes "from aspiration and antagonism" rather than from experience of his subject[73]) that Emerson is remembered. The character I have suggested as being typically Emersonian -- James Gatz, the great Gatsby -- *is* prudent, and in precisely Emersonian terms. That is, he attends to his health and his wealth with scrupulous care (he takes no alcohol and remains remote from the excesses [the "midsummer madness"] which he provides for his guests) always and only in the service of what he believes to be a higher good. Emerson counselled:

> . . . culture, revealing the high origin of the apparent
> world and aiming at the perfection of the man as the
> end, degrades every thing else, as health and bodily
> life, into means. It sees prudence not to be a several
> faculty, but a name for wisdom and virtue conversing
> with the body and its wants. . .. If a man lose his
> balance and immerse himself in any trades or
> pleasures for their own sake, he may be a good wheel
> or pin, but he is not a cultivated man.[74]

Well, Jay Gatsby amassed a criminal fortune because he was in love with an idealized version of his neighbour's wife: it is equally as indisputable that he was motivated by a high idealism as that his faith was horribly misplaced and that his actions were immoral and foolish -- and heroic, in Emerson's terms. He put Emerson's doctrines into practice, and with tragic consequences. On the one occasion when Gatsby admitted to Carraway that Daisy might have loved Tom, that his dream-vision of her might not correspond to her reality (that reality might be more complex than his spiritualized version of it), he observes

that this wouldn't have mattered, since such a love (of Daisy for Tom) "was just personal." To Nick, it seems "a curious remark;" he continues with this comment:

> What could you make of that, except to
> suspect some intensity in his conception of the
> affair that couldn't be measured?[75]

Emerson, however, has already taught us what to "make of that"; the merely personal can and indeed ought always to be sacrificed, degraded into means, to the loftier needs of the transcendent soul. Most of us aren't capable of carrying out our lives at an Emersonian pitch; as Winters notes in his essay on Very and Emerson, Emerson certainly wasn't. And those who are -- Hart Crane or the Great Gatsby -- don't fare well. Winters may well have been unaware of Emerson's insistence that self-reliance was really reliance on a universal soul, yet his reaction to Emerson seems to me to remain accurate. Nowhere does Emerson explain *how* we can know that our reliance on self isn't selfish, isn't the mere imposition of our will on others. Ultimately, it doesn't matter -- the individual convinced of his or her communion with perfection will surely feel, as Gatsby did, that his needs are justified, that he had every right to demand that Daisy act in accordance with his dream of her. The symbolic meaning Gatsby ascribed to Daisy's white and gold purity was undeniably misplaced; correspondence failed him. It is easy to get caught up in Emerson's aspiring prose, and to begin to think solely in his (abstract) terms. But put his doctrine into practice, have characters make choices based on Emersonian assumptions about the nature of reality, and Winters' angry denouncement of Emerson seems inevitable.

It remains true that most of us *don't* set out to live our lives according to Emerson's doctrine; at most we pick up a few aphorisms, and perhaps are encouraged to "hitch our wagon to a star," treating Emerson more or less as a sort of upscale greeting card message. Quentin Anderson, however, makes a case for Emerson's influence on American culture itself as having been pernicious. Thus, not only does Emerson make both conscious and unconscious Gatsbys possible, he has also assisted in the destruction of

what Anderson variously calls community or associated life. Anderson claims that Emerson accomplished this (not singlehandedly) by destroying what had been the "very node of shared experience in Emerson's time"[76] -- religion. Anderson argues that "[i]n religion and not in politics lay the substance of the meaning of associated life"; in attacking religious beliefs, the substructure of society was simultaneously threatened. Not only did Emerson undertake to bring down the church, he "saw that he would have to take its place."

Thus, Emerson "taught the theory and carried on the practice of secular incarnation."[77] Anderson, unlike Winters, recognizes that for Emerson, to be truly individual was to become part of the universal; that is, "*only the activity uniquely mine can manifest the inclusive* ."[78] Thus, continues Anderson,

> [o]ur humanity inheres in our distinctiveness.
> Not, mind you, in our distinctive role vis-a-vis
> others, who enjoy roles of another kind, but our
> distinctiveness as against all the rest of humanity.
> Are we not 'only begotten' sons all? . . . . he not only
> said himself, but made it possible for others to
> say, that the more clearly distinctive the voice of
> the celebrant, the more unmistakably does he
> attest the divine in him.[79]

Anderson acknowledges Emerson's claim that the "genuine self" is not a mere extension of the ego, but recognizes that Emerson's extravagant promise is consistently that the perfected self will be the truly individuated self, that the more truly one is self-reliant, the more distinct will be one's voice and actions: contradistinct, in fact, from those of the mass of humanity, towards whom Emerson frequently expresses his distaste. What Anderson calls "the dialectical character of individual existence"[80] is thus denied, since the individual

ceases to function in any relationship other than that he has with the Over-soul, or with his own (genuine) self.

And yet, as Anderson notes, Emerson did expect himself and his followers to act in some way in the world. He "told his hearers that they alone could bring about change, and at the same time told them that they were the subjects of an unchanging truth."[81] This is indeed correct; Emerson consistently insisted that the only way to affect change in society was by being a "genuine self." He expressed this simply in the 1844 essay "Politics":

> . . . the highest end of government is the culture
> of men; and . . . if men can be educated, the insti-
> tutions will share their improvement and the moral
> sentiment will write the law of the land.[82]

To the extent that the individual is lost in the universal, he will be able to bring about the only reform that matters and have the only meaningful intercourse with his society -- that of bringing about the despotism of the moral sentiment. Anderson views this as being utterly contradictory, and argues that much of the power of Emerson's prose derives from its being driven by "an emotional intensity arising from a contradiction of a finally unresolvable sort."[83] I don't quite agree, or at least I would locate the contradiction elsewhere. It seems to me perfectly plausible (as it did to Plato) that the individual could function in two realms, could learn proper conduct through proximity to the Over-soul, and then in his relationships with others live out his new awareness. What seems more self-defeating to me is Emerson's consistent insistence that the individual who is in contact with his genuine self (and thus with the Over-soul) will speak and act in a way that will compell all who hear or observe him, but that no one ever should acquiesce in the pronouncements of another. And yet surely if all truth is one, and all truth is utterly ravishing, and if the voice that imparts that truth does so with invincible power, there should be little room for

discordant voices. Emerson actually instructs (I use the word deliberately) himself and his followers in the way to win over other selves:

> . . . neither should you put yourself in a false position with your contemporaries by indulging a vein of hostility and bitterness. Though your views are in straight antagonism to theirs, assume an identity of sentiment, assume that you are saying precisely what all think, and in the flow of wit and love roll out your paradoxes in solid column, with not the infirmity of a doubt. . . . assume a consent and it shall presently be granted, since really and underneath their external diversities, all men are of one heart and mind.[84]

If ever the Yankee and the mystic spoke with one voice, surely it was in this passage, urging a pragmatic and arrogant form of "argumentation" that would indeed destroy all possibility of a meaningful dialectic.

To Anderson, it is the notion of secular incarnation, of the identity of the individual and God that lies at the heart of what is wrong, of what is dangerous, in Transcendentalism. Emerson wrote in his Journal in 1837:

> Who shall define to me an Individual? I behold with awe and delight many illustrations of the One Universal Mind. . .. I am only a form of [God]. He is the soul of me. I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, *I am God*, by transferring my *me* out of the flimsy and unclean precinct of my body, my fortunes, my private will, and meekly retiring upon the holy austerities of the Just and the Loving, upon

the secret fountains of nature.[85]

Anderson focusses on the effects that this sort of thinking will have on one's relationships with others; according to him, they will to all intents and purposes cease to exist. The only relationship that will matter is one conducted on a vertical plane, that of the aspiring soul striving to achieve godhood. And since the godhead is located within, the most important relationship any of us can ever have is with his own self. Anderson warns:

> Secular incarnation involves a denial of history, membership in a generation, charity, reform, institutional means of every sort, and at the same time an extreme antinomianism, a claim for the supreme authority of the moment of vision. It represents a redisposition of emotional forces in the face of threatening change. It is founded on, but must not be confused with, a regression to the infantile stage in which the world and the self are coterminous.[86]

One of the greatest and most convincing pieces of writing to describe this "infantile stage" occurs in Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* ; it captures perfectly the fusion of perceiver and perceived. This is from the third meditation in "The Third Century":

> The Citie seemed to stand in Eden, or to be Built in Heaven. The Streets were mine, the Temple was mine, the People were mine, their Clothes and Gold and Silver was mine, as much as their Sparkling Eys Fair Skins and ruddy faces. The Skies were mine, and so were the Sun and Moon and Stars, all the World was mine; and the I the only Spectator and Enjoyer of it. I knew no Churlish Proprieties,

> nor Bounds, nor Divisions: but all Proprieties and
> Divisions were mine: all Treasures and the Possessors
> of them.[87]

From this beatific state Traherne was born into the world of corruption, in which he becomes "as it were a little Child again, that [he] may enter in the Kingdom of GOD." Traherne, unlike Emerson, recognized the essential childishness of this vision; furthermore, he lived and moved within the church. These words describe his memories (given him by the grace of God, he is at pains to say) of the "sweet and curious aprehensions of the world" he had when he was a child. Traherne functioned within the established church of his state; rather than identify himself with God, he is fully aware of his separation. Emerson, of course, and as Anderson notes, offered the self as a substitute for the church, and the ramifications of the offer are indeed enormous. One's relationships, both intimate and social, become (I will say) tainted by one's conviction of, in Gatsby's words, "the unreality of reality,"[88] of the reality of perfection and the ideal. These effects we will explore more closely through Hawthorne's fictional analysis of them; before doing so, I would like to explore the ways in which Coleridge's and Arnold's social criticism enables us to recognize the dangers and limitations inherent in Emersonian doctrines. In that same chapter, I will look at the only book in which Emerson was kept from his love of abstractions and forced to look at an actual subject. That book is *English Traits* ; it is rarely discussed and yet I believe it to be the work for which Emerson *should* be remembered.

[1] Henry James, *Partial Portraits*, ed. Leon Edel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970) 12.

[2] David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum 1850 - 1870* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State College Press, 1951) 40.

[3] Orestes A. Brownson, in *The Spirit-Rapper: An Autobiography*, offers the following conversation between "Mr. Merton" and "Mr. Edgerton, a New England Transcendentalist, a thin, spare man, with a large nose, and a cast of Yankee shrewdness in his not unhandsome face":

> 'I dislike,' he said, 'associations. They absorb the individual,and establish social despotism. All set plans of world-reform are bad. Every one must have a theory, a plan, a Morrison's pill. No one trusts to nature. None are satisfied with wild flowers or native forests . . . .
>
> 'I never dispute . . . . I utter the word given me to utter, and leave it as the ostrich leaveth her eggs . . . .'

(Orestes Brownson, "[A Conversation with a Transcendentalist,]" *Critical Essays on American Transcendentalism*, eds. Philip F. Gura and Joel Myerson [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982] 103.)

In addition to reading Emerson's prose, Brownson may have consulted Edgar Allan Poe's instructive piece, "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (12 July 1845); in it he discusses "'the tone transcendental'":

> In [transcendentalism] the merit consists in seeing into the nature of affairs a very great deal farther than anybody else. This second sight is very efficient when properly managed. A little reading of the "dial" will carry you a

> great way. Eschew, in this case, big words; get them as small as possible, and write them upside down. Look over Channing's poems and quote what he says about a "fat little man with delusive show of Can." Put in something about Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable about Infernal Twoness. Above all, study innuendo. Hint every thing -- assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say "bread and butter" do not by any means say it outright. You may say anything and everything *approaching* to "bread and butter." You may hint at buckwheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oat-meal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious . . . not on any account to say "bread and butter!"

(Edgar Allan Poe, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," *Critical Essays* 96.)

[4] Sowder discusses the British response to Emerson's lecture tour in his second chapter "Among the Philistines." He does not cite the following review which appeared in *Howitt's Journal* on December 11, 1847. The reviewer complained that Emerson's sentences were often "connected only by some gossamer link of association with the subject" -- the association being unique to Emerson. He (it is safe to assume a male reviewer) claimed that the lecture on Swedenborg

> . . . was like a golden mist around a setting sun, -- you perceived nothing but splendid words, without anything definite, at first; but, by and bye, one object after another came clear out to the patient vision, invested with a glory from the medium through which they had passed; but that very medium made the whole obscure.

[5] "Introduction," *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* 3 vols., eds. Stephen E. Whicher, Wallace E. Williams, and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964) 2: xi - xii.

[6] "Introduction," *Early Lectures,* xii.

[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Early Lectures,* 1: 100 - 101.

[8] Baumgartner, "'The Lyceum Is My Pulpit': Homiletics in Emerson's Early Lectures," (*American Literature* XXXIV) 478 - 475.

[9] Baumgartner 485.

[10] Baumgartner 485.

[11] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 1: 215.

[12] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 1: 73 - 74.

[13] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 1: 318.

[14] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 3: 145 - 146.

[15] Emerson, *The Divinity School Address, Works* 1:126.

[16] The notion of Emerson "stringing beads" may appear to be inviting dismissal of Emerson's methods of composition; however, it should be noted that it is an image he himself used on several occasions. His use of the expression is mentioned in David Greene Haskins' little book, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors with Some Reminiscences of Him.*

[17] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 261.

[18] Emerson, "Literature," "The Philosophy of History," *Early Lectures* 2: 57.

[19] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 69 - 70.

[20] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 261.

[21] Emerson, *Nature, Works* 1: 25, 79.

[22] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 247 - 248.

[23] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 310.

[24] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 311.

[25]William Wordsworth, "Preface," *Lyrical Ballads, Prose Works of William Wordsworth,* eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 4 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974) 4: 137.

[26] Buell 101.

[27] David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982) 10.

[28] William Ellery Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing, D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886) 13.

[29] Channing 14.

[30] Channing 15.

[31] Channing 16.

[32] Channing 17 - 18.

[33] Channing 22.

[34] Channing 23.

[35] Channing 24.

[36] Henry Bamford Parkes, "Emerson," *The Pragmatic Test: Essays on the History of Ideas* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970) 40 - 41.

[37] Channing 24 - 25.

[38] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 215.

[39] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 3: 187.

[40] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 215.

[41] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 216.

[42] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 217.

[43] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Collier Books and Macmillan Publishing, 1980) 112.

[44] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 214.

[45] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 220.

[46] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 221.

[47] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 227.

[48] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 311.

[49] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 312.

[50] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 47.

[51] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 45.

[52] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 2: 62.

[53] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 3: 215.

[54] Emerson, *Early Lectures* 3: 234 - 235.

[55] Emerson, *Representative Men*, *Emerson's Complete Works*, ed. J. E. Cabot,11 vols. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887) 4; 47.

[56] Emerson, *Representative Men* 48.

[57] Emerson, *Representative Men* 54.

[58] Emerson, *Representative Men* 55 - 56..

[59] Emerson, *Representative Men* 56.

[60] Emerson, *Representative Men* 61.

[61] Emerson, *Representative Men* 74 - 75.

[62] Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) 3. It should be noted that when Anderson attacks Emerson as a destroyer of American culture, Anderson is using the word to refer to "the intellectual side of civilization" (*SOED*), its accumulation of art, tradition, knowledge

and institutions. Emerson refers to the organic process by which individuals are "improved or refined" (*SOED*). The two usages have a point of connection in that both imply a concern for the means of developing (of humanizing) society.

[63] Yvor Winters, "Jones Very and R. W. Emerson: Aspects of New England Mysticism," *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1937) 279.

[64] Winters, "Jones Very" 268.

[65] Winters, "The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart Crane, or What Are We to Think of Professor X?" *Defense* 590.

[66] Winters, "Jones Very" 267.

[67] Winters, "Jones Very" 268.

[68] Luke 9: 60, Luke 14: 26, Luke 6: 1 - 5, and John 3: 5 - 8.

[69] Matthew 5: 17 - 20, Matthew: 34 - 40.

[70] Emerson, *Essays First Series*, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Centenary Ed. (New York: Ams Press, 1968) 50.

[71] B. L. Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982) 11 - 14. In this passage, Packer refutes Winters' concerns with this passage by explaining that Emerson is mocking his interlocutor, who can only question him in the terms of what Emerson believes to be an outmoded debate. Thus his reference to the Devil is merely intended to display his indifference to the old dichotomies. Packer continues:

> The declaration of Byronic defiance is rendered comic chiefly by the circumstances: how could a decorous ex-minister in the town of Concord 'live from the Devil' even if he wished to? At most he could do what Emerson had done: use the lecture platform to attack the derelictions of traditional Christianity . . . .

Perhaps Packer is ignorant of the tales and novels of Hawthorne; surely they demonstrate that plenty of evil was available to the most virtuous of present or former ministers in the most tranquil of New England towns. The comedy of the passage completely escapes me; Emerson's comment is entirely consonant with other expressions of indifference to other expressions of concern over the consequences of his insistence on self reliance.

[72] Emerson, *Essays First Series* : 240 - 241.

[73] Emerson, *Essays First Series* : 221.

[74] Emerson, *Essays First Series* : 223 - 224.

[75] Fitzgerald 152.

[76] Anderson 6.

[77] Anderson 7.

[78] Anderson 11.

[79] Anderson 12.

[80] Anderson 17.

[81] Anderson 18.

[82] Emerson, *Works* 3: 195 - 196.

[83] Anderson 21.

[84] Emerson, "Prudence," *Essays First Series* : 239; the passage is reworked from a Journal entry made in June of 1831 (*Journals* 2: 385).

[85] Emerson, *Journals* 4: 247.

[86] Anderson 54.

[87] Thomas Trahere, "The Third Century," *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958) 11.

[88] Fitzgerald 100.

Chapter Five

Yvor Winters and Quentin Anderson are not alone in concentrating their discussions of Emerson on the works he published in the 1840s; most critics sensibly focus on the works that first made Emerson's reputation and continue to shape his influence. In this chapter, however, I intend to examine two works written after the heydays of the forties; these are *English Traits* (1856) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860). *Representative Men* (1850) could be included in this discussion; I omit it on the grounds that it largely follows the method of the earlier essays, placing chapters on characters exemplifying opposite qualities in immediate opposition to each other, examining each as though the others didn't exist, moving from hyperbolic praise to censure as the ultimate principles of transcendentalism are applied to the subject. (Carlyle commented that he "generally dissented a little about the *end* of these essays."[1]) There is in them, as I suggested in the previous chapter, an attempt to find a means of connecting the temporal with the transcendental by prolonging or enlarging the area of transition, the moment or place where the known becomes the mysterious (a moment, as we saw, upon whose existence Emerson believed language to depend). But the attempt doesn't finally succeed, largely because Emerson's impatience with the actual is usually greater than his desire, such as it is, to find its real value. His final concern through all these essays is to transcend, to provoke his readers into reaching the correct valuation of the actual in the light of the eternal. All too often, such valuation results in the debasement or diminution of interest in and concern for the actual, whether the actual consists of representative men, cultural artifacts, nature, society, family or the beloved. The works I turn to now were written under somewhat different circumstances from the earlier volumes -- and under different circumstances from each other. After briefly sketching their history, I will discuss what is often seen as their occasion: a decline in Emerson's optimism, a shift in emphasis that is traditionally located in such essays as "Circles" and "Experience." This discussion is, I believe, necessary in order to place the later works more accurately and determine to

what extent their different tone is the result of Emerson's increased awareness of the grimmer aspects of human nature. I will argue that although actual events in Emerson's life did force him to admit a greater significance to events and to the emotional moods consequent upon them, he remains the unrepentant champion of perfectibility and individualism. Unlike many fictional characters who learn to sympathize with and to connect themselves to the human community through suffering (one thinks of Hester Prynne), Emerson, as we will see, continues to insist upon the value of the individual relying, not on a meaningful dialectic with society to sustain him, but on his own genuine self. In *English Traits* he comes as close as he can to recognizing the value of culture and society to shape persons; although the book is instructive to its readers, Emerson seems to have learned little from it, and like all of his works, it too is flawed by what is ultimately an uncomprehending admiration for the powerful individual.

Emerson made three trips to England; of these only the first two are of any significance to his intellectual development. The first occurred after the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker Emerson, in February of 1831 (after less than two years of marriage) and after his resignation from Old North in October of 1832. He sailed, his Journal tells us, "from Boston for Malta, December 25, 1832."[2] On July 19 he left Boulogne, taking "the steamboat for London";[3]he remained in England until early September. That trip was notable mainly for introducing Emerson to Carlyle (he also met Wordsworth and Coleridge); in the first chapter of *English Traits* ("First Visit to England") he comments "On looking over the diary of my journey in 1833, I find nothing to publish in my memoranda of visits to places."[4] The voyage home gave him opportunity to work on *Nature,* about which he writes in his trans-Atlantic Journal, "I like my book about Nature, and wish I knew where and how I ought to live. God will show me."[5] As we have seen, he answered these questions in pragmatic terms by commencing his career as a lecturer; in ethical and moral terms, his struggles with questions of conduct ("how I ought to live") were addressed in essays such as "Self-Reliance." It is indicative perhaps of Emerson's

state of mind (he was surely preoccupied with the immediate problems of career) and relative youth (he was thirty) that he could visit England as simply as any other tourist, noticing nothing about social structures, values, characteristics and so on. This was not the case when he next traveled to England from October to July 1847 - 48.

This second trip, Gay Wilson Allen tells us, like the first, was also partly motivated by a need to escape his life in America. Not only were his finances problematical,but, as Allen notes, "he was bored and dissatisfied with his life in the spring of 1847."[6] Allen cites the following passage from Emerson's journal for that spring:

> With brow bent, with firm intent, I go musing in
> the garden walk. I stoop to pull up a bidens that is
> choking the corn, and find there are two; close behind
> it is a third, & I reach out my arm to a fourth; behind
> that, there are four thousand & one. I am heated &
> untuned. . . .

Upon awaking from this "idiot dream of chickweed & redroot," Emerson "find(s) that I . . . am a chickweed & pipergrass myself."[7]

Emerson's life had perhaps settled into too much of a pattern, had become too safe, too predictable.[8] Consequently, when Alexander Ireland (a successful newspaperman who had met and guided Emerson on his earlier trip to Scotland) invited Emerson to lecture at Mechanics' Institutes in several industrial cities,[9] Emerson, after some consideration, agreed to submit himself to the trials of travel.

The lectures Emerson presented in England were reasonably well received, although Cabot notes that

> Emerson's London audience, to be sure, would
> probably in any case have given themselves but
> little concern with his ideas; it was not the ideas,
> but the man, that attracted them, so far as they were

attracted.[10]

Similarly, Sowder (in *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada*) cites the following review from the *Reasoner* on Emerson's last lecture in England. At the conclusion of the lecture,

> Monckton Milnes 'called on the audience to manifest their gratitude.' This was accomplished 'by rising *en masse*, hearty cheering, waving of hats, etc.' The demonstration was due, no doubt [Sowder comments] to the presence of a man of great soul and strong spirit rather than to acceptance of his doctrines.[11]

Certainly, as Sowder shows, the reviewers and journalists were for the most part kind to Emerson, if occasionally bemused by him. He read a number of different lectures, some old and some prepared while in England; Allen names "Natural Aristocracy," "Genius of the Age," "Shakespeare," and "Eloquence."[12] Emerson ruefully wrote to his (second) wife Lidian that "[t]he newspapers here report my lectures (and London papers reprint) so fully that they are no longer repeatable, and I must dive deeper into the bag and bring up older ones, or write new ones, or cease to read."[13]

The Journals and letters show Emerson to have become a far more capable and critical observer than the Emerson of the 1830s. In the following passages from letters to Lidian, we can see the poles of his response to England:

> Ah! perhaps you should see the tragic spectacles which these streets show, -- these Manchester and these Liverpool streets, by day and by night, -- to know how much of happiest circumstance, how much of safety, of dignity, and of opportunity, belongs to us so easily, that is ravished from this population. Woman is cheap and vile in England,

> it is tragical to see; childhood, too, I see oftenest
> in the state of absolute beggary. . . . But beggary
> is only the beginning and the sign of sorrow and
> evil here.[14]

And in a subsequent letter, discussing the prospect of civil unrest during the depression from which England suffered through the winter of 1837-38:

> Yet, though there is a vast population of hungry
> operatives all over the kingdom, the peace will
> probably not be disturbed by them; they will only,
> in the coming months, give body and terror to the
> demands made by the Cobdens and Brights who
> agitate for the middle class. When these are satis-
> fied, universal suffrage and the republic will come
> in. . . .

But he continues:

> The most wonderful thing I see is this London,
> at once seen to be the centre of the world; the
> immense masses of life, of power, of wealth, and the
> effect upon the men of running in and out amidst the
> play of this vast machinery; the effect to keep them
> tense and silent, and to mind every man his own. It
> is all very entertaining, I assure you.[15]

It is this recognition of poverty and power, both made possible by the "vast machinery" run by the steam engine that strikes me in Emerson's musing on England. Sowder comments that

> [i]n *English Traits* and *Conduct* Emerson was no
> longer concerned, as he had been earlier, with man's

> attempt to transcend himself but with how man lived
> or how he should live on this earth.[16]

In *English Traits* Emerson's fascination with power is brought face to face with the social consequences of unrestrained individualism; consequently, his concern with perfectibility and power gives way at times to an ironic and penetrating analysis of industrial England. *Conduct,* however, as I will show, represents a return to Emerson's earlier, unqualified fascination with perfection and power.

Upon returning from England, Emerson began lecturing from notes on his trip; these, Cabot says, he kept "by him" until they were published as *English Traits*. The "Conduct of Life" lectures were given through the early 50s; they were, according to Cabot, "elaborated in the first six essays of" *The Conduct of Life*. Cabot comments that

> [t]he elaboration consisted in striking out whatever
> could be spared, especially anecdotes and quotations.
> What was kept remained mostly as it was first spoken;
> but, in repeating his lectures, Emerson was in the
> habit of using different papers together, in a way that
> makes the particular title often an uncertain indica-
> tion of what was actually read upon a given occasion.

Emerson's objection "to reports in the newspapers" -- as we have seen, his objections were not the result of a fear of misquotation, but of a desire to reuse his material -- and his "carelessness to preserve his manuscripts after they were printed" makes for considerable difficulties in dating his work after 1848. However, we can accept Cabot's testimonial that *Conduct* is a fairly close record of entire lectures -- not, as were the essays of the forties, an intricate tapestry ("gay rags" Emerson called those first essays) composed of threads from Journals and old lectures.

Cabot notes that when the lectures of the fifties are

compared, for instance, "with 'Nature' and the early lectures we may observe a less absolute tone; the idealism of ten years before remains as true as ever, but there is more explicit recognition of the actual conditions."[17] That the Emerson of the fifties differs in significant ways from the earlier Emerson is generally accepted, but Cabot is suggesting here that nothing in Emerson's thought has changed -- the gaze that once looked only above is now facing straight ahead, but without any shift in belief. The alteration in perception is neither accompanied nor followed by an adjustment of thought. One of the most unsettling things about reading Emerson from his youth to his maturity is the extent to which circumstances do *not* change him. Virtually every plank in his platform can be found in Journal entries written while Emerson was is in his teens; it is disquieting to recognize that a speaker and writer as influential as Emerson had formulated his thought while a teenager. Like Gatsby, Emerson "remained faithful" to the conception of himself and the world he conceived at (about) age seventeen.

Stephen Whicher, in *Freedom and Fate,* provided the framework in which most of us discuss Emerson. He notes that a shift in Emerson's thought began with the essay "Circles," written for *Essays First Series*. Whicher argues that in this essay, "intermingled with [its] celebration of the power of thought to destroy the routine of society" is a recognition of the "impermanence of his own thought. His own convictions too are unsettled."[18] According to Whicher, in this essay,

> [t]ime and experience are teaching Emerson to respect their dominion. His transcendentalism is steadily giving way to a basic empiricism -- one which, though it includes and stresses man's peculiar experience of the Soul, nevertheless pragmatically recognizes the priority of experience over 'Reality.'[19]

I would like to propose another reading of the essay, and to suggest that although in it Emerson does reflect on the possible, negative effects of his beliefs, he

concludes the essay with as powerful an assertion of his philosophy as can be found in any of his works. I do concede Whicher's point that in so far as Emerson does attempt to reconcile the events of life to the demands of his philosophy, the essay is remarkable. I will quote two paragraphs, both of which border on a recognition of the costs of a search for perfection. Emerson has just admitted that "[t]he continual effort to raise himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height, *betrays* [my italics] itself in a man's relations." He doesn't use the neutral verb "shows," but selects a word that suggests how problematical would be social and familial relationships to which Emersonian principles were applied. But consider these paragraphs, which follow directly from the passage just quoted:

> How often must we learn this lesson? Men cease to interest us when we find their limitations. The only sin is limitation. As soon as you once come up with a man's limitations, it is all over with him. Has he talents? It boots not. Infinitely alluring and attractive was he to you yesterday, a great hope, a sea to swim in; now, you have found his shores, found it a pond, and you care not if you never see it again.

And again,

> Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city, and no man knows what is safe, or where it will end. . . . The very hopes of man, the thoughts of his heart, the religion of nations, the manners and morals of mankind are all at the mercy of a new generalization. Generalization is always a new influx of the divinity into the mind.

Hence the thrill that attends it.[20]

Several things are notable about these paragraphs. There is the recognition that his ideas could constitute a "conflagration";but this is followed by the typically Emersonian reconstruction of the metaphor into a divinely instituted "thrill" -- which gives us the opportunity of viewing Emerson as a sort of social arsonist, a rather apt metaphor. And a few pages later, Emerson attempts to settle the stomachs of his no doubt motion sick audience by assuring them that "this incessant movement and progression which all things partake could never become sensible to us but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability in the soul." Thus, although the "eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides."[21] The probable consequences of disregarding the other seem almost to penetrate to Emerson's consciousness (they certainly effect his diction), but ultimately the power of the individual (his own) soul absorbs his thought. Nowhere does he explain how an uninstructed soul will have the strength to remain constant in the face of the flux of experience: he completely fails to recognize that his own strength of character comes from his participation in a still-functioning culture.

The essay begins with what to most of us would be a sobering recognition:

> Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.
>
> This fact, as far as it symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet, at once the inspirer and condemner of every success, may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department.[22]

And yet it seems to me that the essay takes these ideas which would depress most of us in order to assure us of their positive value. Emerson concludes the essay by insisting that "[t]rue conquest is the causing the calamity to fade and disappear as an early cloud of insignificant results," and "[t]he way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment."[23] The essay differs from others in the volume by articulating or hinting at what seems to me would be the actual cost of applying Emersonian notions to one's life, but nowhere in this essay does Emerson actually admit that his idealism, his quest for perfection, is incompatible with human ability; nor does he ever fully recognize either what "post-Emersonian" life would be like or the extent to which he owed his own intellectual and moral well-being to the very aspects of society and culture he sought to devalue.

Whicher's basic premise is that Emerson's "initial transcendentalism [failed] to allow for all his experience"; consequently, he attempted "to work out for himself what life would look like if experience and not faith should be given the last word."[24] Thus, he substitutes for "the potential God" of the earlier essays, "a neutral personality open . . . on all sides, adrift on the stream of time and circumstance."[25] This premise, according to Whicher, characterizes the essays usually cited as Emerson's most significant statements of retrenchment, "Experience" (published in *Essays Second Series)* and "Montaigne" (*Representative Men).* However, in "Experience," as in "Circles," Emerson recognizes that

> [i]f I have described life as a flux of moods, I
> must now add that there is that in us which changes
> not and which ranks all sensations and states of mind.[26]

And in fact Whicher recognizes that Emerson, even in this essay, "without warning, in the middle of a paragraph, with the facility of habit" accomplishes "the old revolution . . . once more. Idealism passes into spiritualism; the Fall of Man becomes his salvation."[27]

Thus, the essay concludes that "[w]e must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time, and, with a remarkable change of tone, gives the rallying exhortation "up again, old heart! -- ."[28]

This isn't to say that Emerson doesn't, in this essay, say things that he hadn't said in any previous essay -- or at least not concentrated in this way. But I do agree with Julie Ellison, who, in *Emerson's Romantic Style* points out that "[i]n fact, these anxieties [fate, necessity, and skepticism] never leave his consciousness for more than a few pages at a time, even in his earliest literary experiments."[29] To point, as Whicher does, to events in Emerson's life and to argue that a series of tragedies led Emerson to espouse a skepticism at odds with his earlier optimism seems futile. After all, Emerson's father died in 1811, when Emerson was eight years old; his brother Bulkeley was mentally deranged; Emerson's own health was, throughout his youth, never better than precarious; his first wife, Ellen Tucker Emerson, died in 1831, shortly after their marriage; his brother Edward died in 1834. In this context, the death of his first son can hardly be seen to have presented Emerson with a new view of life. On the contrary, Ellison argues that Emerson's

> . . . literary development consists . . . of the movement of ongoing antagonism, the movement from memory to surprise, from causality to casualties, from guilt to the exercise of critical powers to delight in them.[30]

Ellison claims that "in Emerson's prose, irony and the sublime accomplish the same end":

> . . . irony diminishes anxieties about tradition and authority through the subject's enjoyment of his power to fragment and play with his culture from within, as it were; the sublime similarly gratifies him by allowing him to behold it from

above.[31]

The consequence (and aim) of Emerson's use of both the sublime (as Ellison describes it) and irony is detachment and objectification. Thus, according to Ellison, "[t]he speaker of "Experience" expects to be admired for telling us, 'I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture.'"[32] (A few pages later, Ellison accepts convention and identifies the speaker of "Experience" as Emerson himself[33]) There are passages in "Experience" that Ellison recognizes as "laments"; but the nature of the problem she expresses in terms that differ radically from those used by Whicher. To Ellison, when Emerson says "Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow" (34), he is simply regretfully recognizing that at times "[t]he writer cannot muster sufficient force to overcome the inertia of his raw material . . . . [and is kept] from manipulating it in transitional play."[34] Ellison's reading of the essay is intriguing but in my opinion overly dependent on ideas that postdate Emerson by a century.

Emerson's first editors responded to "Experience" more directly:

> This essay was written at one of the critical epochs of Mr. Emerson's life. . . . The old and the new were contending in him. His growth was not without pain. . . . He had cut loose from tradition and experienced the difficulties attendant on trying to live only according to each day's oracle. Life became experimental, and manifold experiments were suggested in that period of spiritual and social upheaval. He was severely tried in these years. In many places in his journals he gratefully recognizes his debt to the Puritan tradition of a virtuous ancestry and their inherited impulse. This carried him through the whirlpools or sloughs in which he saw many of the

> sons of the morning of that day sink.
>
> He passed through this epoch of unrest bravely, and came soon into that serene strength and happiness which remained for life.[35]

While I don't fully accept Whicher's codification of Emerson's life into sharply distinct periods, I also question Ellison's detachment of "Experience" from its roots in Emerson's life. In a sense, the essay dramatizes Emerson (his Journals suggest that Waldo's death affected him far more than this essay suggests); to view it as an artistic re-creation (rather than simply confessional) seems to me a useful way to move between the extremes of Whicher and Ellison. Considered in this light, "Experience" can be regarded as what it is: a carefully crafted work of art, and not simply or only the outpourings of a stereotypical Romantic. It is, certainly, connected in intimate ways to events in Emerson's life, but it needn't be read as though it expressed all that was in Emerson's heart. To do so would be to ignore Emerson's method of composition: to insist upon as absolute in one essay what he would subsequently show to be only part of the truth, absolute and irrefutable, but not complete.

Ellison points out, as has every critic of Emerson's style, that he

> . . . composes by restating an idea in the metaphors and diction of many idioms. Because repetitive sentences create parallel rather than linear arrangements, the paragraph strikes us as disjunctive. There is no flow of argument or exposition, but rather a series of discrete acts of substitution. Paradoxically, Emerson's mature prose is closer to the discontinuity of the journals than to his earlier public performances.[36]

By "Emerson's mature prose," Ellison can only mean the works of the forties, because those of the fifties are startlingly different in style from the two earlier collections of essays. Emerson developed his distinctive style in reaction to the influences he felt were stultifying his own voice; it is characterized, according to Ellison, by aggression, antagonism and resistance.

Unlike Whicher, Ellison insists, as we have seen, that Emerson contended with moods of despair (specifically in the face of overwhelming intellectual influences) from the time of his youth. And when he achieved this new prose style, he did not renounce these "old attitudes," his "daydreams of glory, his paralysis before excessive knowledge, his sense that he lives in an impoverished age." Ellison notes that in the Journals, "statements of anxiety and self-enjoyment, doubt and pride alternate with each other," and do so for decades. Certainly this is true, and Ellison makes the further point that his essays "come to be organized by the repetition of these movements from deprivation to power." Because these movements represent his rescue "from a regressive susceptibility to great men," Emerson derives "pleasure" from re-entering "the state of crisis" that made them necessary; "[h]e celebrates his theory of criticism with narcissistic impudence."[37]

As I have done, Ellison recognizes the importance of the notion of transition to Emerson, although we part company in our interpretations both of its meaning to Emerson and the extent of his interest in it. Ellison connects the violent and disjunctive transitions of Emerson's prose to a larger concern. "The survival of these gaps in his published prose is intentional and purposeful";[38] they are used, she claims, "for the sake of the mental sensation of leaping between fragments. The further apart statements are, so to speak, the more aware the mind is of its power in moving from one to the other."[39] The style then lends itself to an expression of aggression and detachment. Ellison cites the following central statement of Emersonian transition. I have already quoted it in part; here is the entire passage from "Plato":

> Our strength is transitional, alternating; or, shall I say, a thread of two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; the taste of two metals in contact; and our enlarged powers at the approach and at the departure of a friend; the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible.[40]

To Ellison, the passage celebrates the virtues of detachment and separation, of objectification and power; "[b]y continuously separating and rejoining consciousness and its contents, energy and matter, Emerson simultaneously enjoys freedom from and mastery of facts."[41] But when detachment occurs without transition, the actual becomes unbearable, because of its separation from "vision."[42] Thus, Ellison is using the term transition to mean something similar to "transcendence," and this seems to me an error. As I have already said, I take transition in Emerson to refer to moments and places when and where the individual is able to participate in both sea and shore, both presence and absence, both the Real and the actual. This is surely the value of the poet to the rest of us (and to Emerson's essay, "The Poet"); he is the one who, through the use of language (as I have pointed out, by its very nature transitional, two-sided) can grant us true perception of the double nature of life:

> The world being thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For though life is great, and fascinates and absorbs; and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named; yet they cannot originally

> use them . . . . The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object . . . . As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For through that better perception he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature.[43]

Emerson's intent is to find a way to allow the energizing power of transcendence to flow back to individuals incapable of such experiences; this can occur only if a window is opened by one who can see beyond effects into causes; that window is made of words which are capable when used by poets of making available both the ideal and the actual.

In an ironic passage in "Nominalist and Realist" (the penultimate essay in *Essays Second Series)*, Emerson describes what can happen if the transitional moment is compressed rather than expanded:

> The end and the means, the gamester and the game, -- life is made up of the intermixture and re-action of these two amicable powers, whose marriage appears beforehand monstrous, as each denies and tends to abolish the other. We must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and their

> concord introduce wild absurdities into our thinking and speech. No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie; Speech is better than silence; silence is better than speech; -- All things are in contact; every atom has a sphere of repulsion; -- Things are, and are not, at the same time; -- and the like. All the universe over, there is but one thing, this old Two-Face, creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong, of which any proposition may be affirmed or denied.[44]

In this absurdist vision, speech is impossible, and instead of transition, we have repulsion. Obviously, transition, however it is managed, is essential to communication.

Ellison makes no comment on the ways in which *English Traits* differs from Emerson's earlier works; it seems to hold little interest for her. Certainly it is stylistically very different from the essays of the forties. To some extent, the differences can be accounted for pragmatically. *Representative Men, English Traits,* and *The Conduct of Life* were all published almost directly from lectures; the elaborate and careful cutting and pasting from Journal and lecture that characterizes the earlier volumes is abandoned. Certainly this method would make for speedier publication, but there is also considerable evidence that Emerson was not satisfied with the results of his stylistic experiments of the forties; this dissatisfaction seems to further undermine Ellison's elaborate and rather ingenious analysis of Emerson's style.

Emerson's response to expressions of dismay at his stylistic experimentation of the forties was apologetic. In a letter to Carlyle written before the publication of *Essays First Series,* Emerson warned his friend to "[e]xpect nothing more of my powers of construction -- only boards and logs tied together."[45]

Carlyle responded to the first collection of essays, with lavish praise but some hesitation:"Objections of all kinds I might make . . . to a dialect of thought and speech as yet imperfect enough . . but what were all that?"[46] To *Essays Second Series* Carlyle responded with bewilderment:

> . . . I have to object still . . . that we find you a Speaker, indeed, but as it were a *Soliloquizer* on the eternal mountain-tops only, in vast solitudes where men and their affairs lie all hushed in a very dim remoteness . . . -- whom, so fine a fellow seems he, we could perpetually punch into, and say 'Why won't you come and help us then?'

Not only does Carlyle complain of Emerson's refusal to connect his essays with the actual problems of society; he also deplores what I would describe as its equally egocentric style:

> By the bye I ought to say, the sentences are very *brief* ; and did not . . . always entirely cohere for me. Pure genuine Saxon; strong and simple; of a clearness, of a beauty -- But they did not, sometimes, rightly stick to their foregoers and their followers: the paragraph not as a beaten *ingot,* but as a beautiful square *bag* of *duckshot* held together by canvas![47]

Emerson's reply is instructive; he first addresses Carlyle's objections to his prose style:

> I doubt not your stricture on the book as sometimes unconnected & inconsecutive is just. Your words are very gentle. I should describe it much more harshly. My knowledge of the defects of these things I write is all but sufficient to hinder

> me from writing at all. I am only a sort of lieutenant
> here in the deplorable absence of captains, & write the
> laws ill as thinking it a better homage than universal
> silence. You Londoners know little of the dignities
> & duties of country Lyceums.[48]

We know, of course, the motives and needs that led Emerson to develop the "lapidary style" of his first published essays. But this passage seems to suggest that the finished result was unsatisfactory to its creator, that he viewed it as a style-by-default, merely the partial and temporary solution to a problem. I sense no disingenuity in these remarks. That this is not mere social modesty (and usually Emerson was modest about what he perceived to be a genuine fault: his cold personality) is emphasized by the subsequent lines:

> But of what you say now & heretofore respecting
> the remoteness of my writing & thinking from real
> life, though I hear substantially the same criticism
> made by my countrymen, I do not know what it means.[49]

About the style Emerson had serious reservations; about the value of his ideas he had none, and does not hesitate to tell Carlyle so. In no subsequent published work does he publish anything as startling as the essays of the early and mid-forties.

English Traits, with *Representative Men*, is one of Emerson's first attempts to modify his style; certainly, as I have shown, it has always been accepted as significantly different from the earlier volumes of more miscellaneous essays. Emerson begins *Traits* with a description of his first visit to England; the chapter is notable for its entertaining sketches of Wordsworth and Coleridge. This is followed by a chapter on the voyage itself, and then one entitled "Land." Here, Emerson asks (the use of rhetorical questions is reminiscent of Channing's and Emerson's sermons and earlier lectures) "Why England is England? What are the elements of that power which the English hold over other nations?" The questions, he goes on to imply, deserves an answer since England "for the last

millennium" has been the most "successful country in the universe."[50] And the queries are of particular interest to Americans since "[t]he American is only the continuation of the English genius into new conditions, more or less propitious." His aim is to make "a social or moral estimate of England"; this will be difficult since "England has innoculated all nations with her civilization, intelligence and tastes."[51] His proposed method of circumventing this "tyranny" will be comparison -- "with the civilizations of the farthest east and west, the old Greek, the Oriental, and, much more the ideal standard."[52] This is analogous to the method devised by Coleridge in his great work of social criticism, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1830). In that essay, Coleridge offers his "Idea of A CONSTITUTION; AND, LIKEWISE, OF A NATIONAL CHURCH." By "idea," he goes on to say, he means

> . . . that conception of a thing, which is not abstracted from any particular state, form, or mode, in which the thing may happen to exist at this or at that time; nor yet generalized from any number or succession of such forms or modes; but which is given by the knowledge of *its ultimate aim* .[53]

Emerson intends to describe while judging the object of his description by an ideal standard without ever explaining of what his ideal state consists; Coleridge offers a carefully delineated ideal standard by which we can judge what exists and know towards what we should strive. In his self-declared "anxiety to be fully understood by"[54] his readers, he warns that:

> . . . the particular form, construction, or model, that may be best fitted to render the idea intelligible, and most effectually serve the purpose of an instructive *diagram*, is not necessarily the mode or form in which it actually arrives at realization.

> In the works both of man and of nature -- in the
> one by the imperfection of the means and materials,
> in the other by the multitude and complexity of
> simultaneous purposes -- the fact is most often
> otherwise.[55]

Knowledge of the perfect, then, enables us to know in which direction to strive; far from presenting those aware of the ideal with both the means and the motive for transcending the emotional and relational ties that constitute society, Coleridge insists eloquently on the absolute and inherent value of the actual:

> . . . all social law and justice being grounded on the
> principle, that a person can never, but by his own
> fault, become a thing, or, without grievous wrong, be
> treated as such. . . . [56]

We have seen that the treatment of others as things (they are merely actual, effects and not causes) is one of the negative effects of Emersonian perfectibility; in the next chapter I will look at Hawthorne's critique of this aspect of Emerson's thought. Coleridge's awareness of his reader's need for "instruction," his concern that they be able to understand him, his reverence for both his subject and audience stand in direct contrast to Emerson's apparent indifference.

Occasionally in *Traits* we can see such Emersonian principles as correspondence and compensation functioning; thus, Emerson links the appearance of the English to their moral character:

> On the English face are combined decision and
> nerve with the fair complexion, blue eyes and open and
> florid aspect. Hence the love of truth, hence the sensi-
> bility, the fine perception and poetic construction.
> The fair Saxon man, with open front and honest

> meaning, domestic, affectionate, is not the wood out
> of which cannibal, or inquisitor, or assassin is made,
> but he is moulded for law, lawful trade, civility,
> marriage, the nurture of children, for colleges,
> churches, charities and colonies.[57]

Both the concept, and its application here, strike me as simply naive, and one of the virtues of *Traits* is its relative freedom from such assertions, and its complete avoidance of any speculations on the philosophical assumptions that permit them. On the contrary, Emerson's subject seems to force him to pay a careful attention to the object he is describing, and to motivate what for him is unfortunately a rare and sustained concern for it.

In *Traits*, in an intriguing variation of his standard tactic of admiring then transcending and blaming, Emerson demonstrates a deft ability to juxtapose praise and censure, so that what he gives at the beginning of each chapter (unstinted praise) he snatches back in the second half. This seems to have been more than just a literary device and philosophical urge with him; he began many relationships with what seems an excess of enthusiasm that soon moderated. But as I've just suggested, he made a temperamental quirk and a stylistic and structural tactic into a principle, and on numerous occasions he comments on the disappointment that is the inevitable consequence of a deepening knowledge of the other. It is interesting that the most significant examples of this tendency occur in the essay and lecture on love. There are two lectures on the subject; much of the fifth in the series "Human Culture," entitled "The Heart," Emerson subsequently used in "Friendship" (*Essays First Series*). The later lecture "Love," fourth in the series "Human Life," is largely incorporated into the essay of the same name which follows "Friendship" in *First Series*. What motivated Emerson was of course the desire to transcend. The habit of thought and style that led William Ellery Channing to move "by easy transitions upwards" also led him to "look down in hope upon the wide-spread promise of peace on

earth, imaging the harmony of heaven."[58] Emerson, however, often fails to return to his starting point; his intent is not to engage in dialectic but to urge an easy transcendence which ultimately ensures the devaluation of the transcended object.

In *Traits,* however, what seems to me to be a defect of personality and thought becomes something of a virtue. Thus, in the chapter entitled "Ability," Emerson begins by praising what are indeed good qualities, what he identifies as the English virtues of determination, honesty, realistic logic, justice, and "a passion for utility."[59] He continues by praising their "practical activity"[60] and by recognizing that they have forcibly created all they have. He follows this by commenting:

> The nearer we look, the more artificial is their social system. Their law is a network of fictions. Their property, a scrip or certificate of right to interest on money that no man ever saw . . . . The pauper lives better than the free laborer, the thief better than the pauper, and the transported felon better than the one under imprisonment. . . . The sovereignty of the seas is maintained by the impressment of seamen.[61]

Similarly, in "Wealth," Emerson follows his praise of English inventiveness and creative power with the warning that "the machine unmans the user. What he gains in making cloth, he loses in general power." The statement is followed by a passage in which social evils are deplored and Emersonian solutions proposed in an unexpectedly convincing way:

> Then society is admonished of the mischief of the division of labor, and that the best political economy is care and culture of men; for in these crises all are ruined except such as are proper individuals, capable

> of thought and of new choice and the application
> of their talent to new labor.[62]

The point is clear -- only persons self-confident enough to adapt will survive radical social change. Furthermore, enlightened self-interest demands that society prepare its members for such developments. Here, the Emersonian solution depends on society itself, which is to be the instrument of the needful "care and culture." The alternation of praise and censure works in *Traits,* I would suggest, because in its chapters Emerson explores both sides of "old Two-Face"; his criticisms are specific and balanced. Sowder has shown, in *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles,* that some British reviewers fully recognized Emerson's agenda in *Traits* ; "'He first gives you a little honey,' wailed one victim, 'and then stings you.'"[63] A writer for the *New Quarterly Review* "snapped: 'If you don't like the country -- d--n you -- you can leave it!'"[64]

The chapters that contain the most significant and sustained social criticism are those that deal with three central English institutions: "Aristocracy," "Universities," and "Religion." In each of these chapters, Emerson praises the relevant architectural (to him) artifacts -- the castles, the colleges, and the churches and cathedrals. In "Aristocracy," he describes the estates as "the paradises of the nobles, where the livelong repose and refinement are heightened by the contrast with the roar of industry and necessity."[65] He recognizes the possibility that ability might meet rank and acknowledges the value of such a union, while also recognizing that the class has outlived its usefulness and exists now primarily as a "gorgeous show."[66] To Emerson, the effect of industrialism has been to offer power to any with the character to take it:

> The great powers of industrial art have no exclusion
> of name or blood. The tools of our time, namely
> steam, ships, printing, money and popular education,
> belong to those who can handle them; and their
> effect has been that advantages once confined to

> men of family are now open to the whole middle class. The road that grandeur levels for his coach, toil can travel in his cart.[67]

This passage presents some problems which I will look at in more detail later in this chapter; Emerson's consistent equation of wealth with temporal power and with virtue is indeed disturbing. He concludes this chapter, however, with a description of a new "aristocracy" based on culture:

> A multitude of English, educated at the universities, bred into their society with manners, ability and the gifts of fortune, are every day confronting the peers on a footing of equality, and outstripping them, as often, in the race of honor and influence. That cultivated class is large and ever enlarging.[68]

The idea isn't fully developed, but in this paragraph Emerson comments upon an educated (a cultivated) class of persons interacting with its society in a positive and purposeful way.

Emerson's criticism of the universities (that is, Oxford and Cambridge) is simple: "These seminaries are finishing schools for the upper classes, and not for the poor."[69] He readily admits, however, that English scholars are fitter; more significantly, "they read better than we, and write better." Emerson attributes this in part to the English student's access to ancient libraries; the wealth that secures these also ensures the existence of the virtue Matthew Arnold calls disinterestedness:

> English wealth falling on their school and university training, makes a systematic reading of the best authors, and to the end of a knowledge how the things whereof they treat really stand: whilst pamphleteer or journalist, reading for an

> argument for a party, or reading to write, or at
> all events for some by-end imposed on them,
> must read meanly and fragmentarily.[70]

The presence of great libraries might seem an odd thing for the anti-intellectual Emerson to praise, and it is indeed intriguing to see him describing as the "advantage" had by "a scholar [who] immediately on hearing of a book, can consult it" over "one who is on the quest, for years, and reads inferior books because he cannot find the best." Furthermore, Emerson recognizes the value of a scholarly community: "the great number of cultivated men keep each other up to a high standard. The habit of meeting well-read and knowing men teaches the art of omission and selection."[71] He concludes the chapter by noting that "[u]niversities are of course hostile to genius," but recognizes that the "university must be retrospective." And "moribund" though he finds them, he admits that the English universities can still surprise him; "out comes a poetic influence," a "restorative genius."[72] The Emersonian ideal is still functioning, but in a sort of Arnoldian "return upon himself," the author of *The American Scholar* is admirably able to recognize the value of a system he once attacked.

While Emerson insists that "[n]o people of the present day can be explained by their national religion,"[73] in his chapter "Religion," he claims to believe that Christianity, when it first came to England, "drew . . . a firm line between barbarism and culture."[74] He further argues that the parish system, which should ensure the presence of a clergyman in every parish, "with the fact that a classical education has been secured to the clergyman, makes them 'the link which unites the sequestered peasantry with the intellectual advancement of the age.'"[75] He recognizes the connection between the universities and the church, noting that "their [the universities'] first design is to form the clergy. Thus the clergy for a thousand years have been the scholars of the nation."[76] This church was created, according to Emerson, by genuine visits of the religious spirit, but "the age of the Wycliffes, Cobhams, Arundels, Beckets; of the Latimers, Mores, Cranmers . . .

is gone;" this because "the spirit that dwelt in this church has glided away to animate other activities."[77] His criticisms of the church are fairly predictable, both in their content and expression; Emerson first articulated them in his *Divinity School Address*:. Here he writes, "Their religion is a quotation; their church is a doll."[78] He accuses English Catholicism of not respecting "power, but only performance"; the church values "ideas only for an economic result."[79] Throughout *Traits* (as elsewhere in his work) Emerson uses steam as a metaphor for various aspects of English character; here he suggests that "there is in an Englishman's brain a valve that can be closed at pleasure, as an engineer shuts off steam." Thus, the "most sensible and well-informed men possess the power of thinking just so far as the bishop in religious matters";[80] nor are the clergy any more capable of independent thought. The essay is studded with acidic remarks: "a bishop is only a surpliced merchant. Through his lawn I can see the bright buttons of the shopman's coat glitter"; "The gospel it preaches is 'By taste are ye saved.'"[81] Certainly this subject draws the sharpest criticisms from Emerson. He recognizes the beauty of the liturgy, and acknowledges that it bears the marks of having been created by persons inspired by their belief; he fails, however, to conceive of any value for it in this "new age" with its "new desires, new enemies, new trades, new charities" and which "reads the Scriptures with new eyes."[82] Emerson, in the words of T. S. Eliot is one who, "[e]ncouraged by superficial notions of evolution, / Which [become], in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past," is incapable of recognizing in the liturgy a way of connecting past to present to future in a mysteriously powerful way:

> Here the impossible union
> Of spheres of existence is actual,
> Here the past and future
> Are conquered, and reconciled. . . . [83]

T. S. Eliot, of course, follows Coleridge and Arnold (to whose work we shall now turn) in his search to find meaningful ways of connecting the present to the past, and thus to the

future; the iconoclast Emerson truly sought only to transcend, and the temple of the individual with which he replaced what he found to be meaningless has proven to be an inadequate centre for many of those who accept it.

Quentin Anderson, as we have seen, accused Emerson of attacking the very root of his society, its religion. Two English social critics, like Emerson, found themselves unable to accept the religion presented to them. And like Emerson, both Coleridge and Matthew Arnold sought to discover ways of vivifying what they recognized as dangerously weak. But Emerson's attempt to revive Unitarianism was brief and, it seems to me, ill-advised; his indifference to the consequences of his incendiary urgings reveals his final indifference to the continuation or collapse of Unitarianism. Coleridge attempted the difficult task of reinterpreting Anglican theology; Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* among other works, attempted to replace religion with culture. And in *On the Constitution of Church and State*, Coleridge also attempted to formulate a means of providing an essentially secular society with the spiritual nourishment he recognized to be essential for its meaningful survival. One of the weaknesses of Emerson is that while in his most central works he provides sharp critiques of the established religion of his day, his entire agenda for reformation consists in urging the individual to consult his (supposedly altruistic) self. *English Traits* is largely free of this failing -- perhaps in the act of describing specific problems and in the face of (what Emerson never admits are) the consequences of individualism (in this case, economically induced dislocation and poverty) even Emerson felt the impropriety of his usual exhortations. Both Coleridge and Arnold, however, feel themselves responsible to connect criticism or provocation with instruction; their works remain valuable in ways that Emerson's, in my view, do not.

I have praised *English Traits* for its social criticism; it must be admitted, however, that it is primarily in contrast to other of Emerson's works that it merits such praise. Despite his recognition that the labourer in an industrial society is in danger of losing that which makes him fully human, the bulk of the book praises industrialization

without qualification. Indeed, Emerson's admiration for power and prosperity ensure that he will admire the successful industrialist as one who has seized the ideas of his time, who has harnessed forces hitherto untamable, and who has imposed the print of his character on his world. Thus:

> Against the cry of the old tenantry and the sympathetic cry of the English press, they have rooted out and planted anew, and now six millions of people live, and live better, on the same land that fed three millions.[84]

And again, "Who now will work and dare, shall rule . . . . intellect and personal force should make the law . . . ."[85] He devotes an entire chapter, aptly titled "Wealth," to catalogues of the riches England has accumulated since industrialization. Here is Coleridge on the same subject:

> . . . yea, the machinery of the wealth of the nation made up of the wretchedness, disease and depravity of those who should constitute the strength of the nation! Disease, I say, and vice, while the wheels are in full motion; but at the first stop the magic wealth-machine is converted into an intolerable weight of pauperism!

And again, he asks,

> Has the national welfare, have the *weal* and happiness of the people, advanced with the increase of the circumstantial prosperity? Is the increasing number of wealthy individuals that which ought to be understood by the wealth of the nation?[86]

In *Conduct of Life* Emerson juxtaposes wealth with power: if the two are connected so that wealth grows and does not merely stagnate, all will be well:

> Wealth is the application of mind to nature; and
> the art of getting rich consists not in industry,
> much less in saving, but in a better order, in time-
> liness, in being at the right spot. . . . Men of
> sense esteem wealth to be the assimilation
> of nature to themselves, the converting of the sap
> and juices of the planet to the incarnation and
> nutriment of their design. Power is what they want . . .
> power to execute their design, power to give legs and
> feet, form and actuality to their thought. . . .[87]

Once attained, this wealth (by which, as Buell notes in *Literary Transcendentalism*, "Emerson means broadly the art of controlling nature, not just making money"[88]) is intended to lead to spiritual acquisitiveness;

> The true thrift is always to spend on the
> higher plane; to invest and invest, with keener
> avarice, that he may spend in spiritual creation
> and not in augmenting animal existence.[89]

This will occur through the sort of cultural philanthropy practiced, in actuality, by many of the American industrialists; to Emerson, their generosity in funding various institutions is to be seen as a continuation of (and a justification for) their vast accumulations of wealth. Emerson's philosophy commits him to speak on behalf of the empowered and to provide a rationale for the sort of indifference to the "mechanized population" Coleridge deplores.

As Buell notes, the structure of *Conduct* is complex; it mimics that of Emerson's earlier lectures on culture (and many other of his essays) by moving upwards from the actual ("Fate," "Power," and "Wealth") to questions of character formation and

finally to the highest spiritual concerns. This should be obvious from a glance at the table of contents; it is typical of Emerson that a book beginning with a discussion of the fatal nature of reality should end with a chapter entitled "Illusions," which concludes with an image "of the transfigured scholar catching a glimpse of "the gods . . . sitting around him."[90] This is indeed the structural principle on which the book is based; it is also true that Emerson was fascinated by such power, whether of rhetoric or steam, whether spiritual or actual, and his frequent equations of all forms of power with each other (after all, they correspond) permits the book to be read, as in fact it was, as a rationale for middle class values.

Coleridge, however, recognizes more fully the evils *inherent* in industrialization, and perceiving as he does its dehumanizing effects on the English population, Coleridge insists that a great national institution must be established (it already exists structurally in the national church) to provide the knowledge

> necessary to qualify [every individual to be] a
> member of the state, the free subject of a civil-
> ized realm. We do not mean those degrees of
> moral and intellectual cultivation which distinguish
> man from man in the same civilized society, much
> less those that separate the Christian from the this-
> worldian; but those only that constitute the civil-
> ized man in contra-distinction from the barbarian . . . .[91]

This would be accomplished by maintaining the universities to add to the body of existing knowledge and to instruct others in it; those so instructed would be sent throughout the country (as were the parish priests Emerson retrospectively admired),

> . . . the objects and final intention of the whole order
> being these -- to preserve the stores, to guard the
> treasures, of past civilization, and thus to bind the

> present with the past; to perfect and add to the same,
> and thus to connect the present with the future; but
> especially to diffuse through the whole community . . .
> that quantity and quality of knowledge which was
> indispensable both for the understanding of those
> rights, and for the performance of the duties corres-
> pondant.[92]

Emerson, as Anderson has pointed out, sought to disconnect past from present; rather than seeking to "perfect and add to" the culture of the past, he sought to achieve the perfection of the dislocated individual, with, as Anderson argues, a consequent destruction of culture.

Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy,* is directly concerned with the relationship of culture to perfection. For Emerson, through proper self-cultivation, the individual could achieve a state of perfection which would enable him to realize his full potential and to act purposefully. Arnold, however, connects culture and perfection with ethics:

> Culture is then properly described not as having its
> origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the
> love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection.* It
> moves by the force, not merely or primarily of
> the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also
> of the moral and social passion for doing good.[93]

Like Emerson, Arnold writes that

> Religion says: *The kingdom of God is within you* ;
> and culture, in like manner, places human perfection
> in an *internal* condition, in the growth and pre-
> dominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished
> from our animality.[94]

However, and here he differs absolutely from Emerson, Arnold argues that

> . . . because men are all members of one great whole, and the sympathy which is in human nature will not allow one member to be indifferent to the rest or to have a perfect welfare independent of the rest, the expansion of our humanity, to suit the idea of perfection which culture forms, must be a *general* expansion. Perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated.[95]

Thus for Arnold, culture will ensure the *end* of individualism, and culture depends upon what for Arnold is simply a fact of our humanity: that our lives are intertwined, and that a movement to "perfection" must be "*general*." Emerson turned to self-cultivation as the means of ensuring the triumphant ascendency of the individual. As we have repeatedly seen, he did not intend his exultation of the individual, his insistence on the divinity of each person, to result in rampant egotism, in selfish behaviour. And yet his attempts to qualify (largely through the simple assertion that it will not be so) can not (and Anderson argues convincingly, have not) had that effect. Rather, his insistence that each person listen and act upon the promptings of an inner voice, *whatever they are*, must inevitably result in a willingness to sever connections, to attack the intricate and delicate strands that bind one to the other, past to present, and present to future. Emerson's stance of provocateur is emblematic of this; whereas both Coleridge and Arnold emphasize the need for an educated class to humanize their society by "diffusing" and making prevalent "the best ideas of their times," Emerson insisted on his right and obligation to abandon all institutions and to urge the untutored self as the standard of all judgement.

Arnold wrote *Culture and Anarchy* because he feared that the individualism he saw rampant in industrial England would destroy its culture, its society. He argues that

"[o]ur prevalent notion is . . . that it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to be able to do as he likes. On what he is to do when he is thus free . . . we not lay so much stress."[96] He argues that the "notion . . . of *the State* " (it is the notion that informs Coleridge's discussion),

> the nation in its collective and corporate character,
> entrusted with stringent powers for the general
> advantage, and controlling individual wills in the
> name of an interest wider than that of individuals,

has been lost. In its place is the ideal "that a State is in reality made up of the individuals who compose it, and that every individual is the best judge of his own interests."[97] This latter definition is of course precisely the one that motivates Emerson; Arnold argues (using an organic metaphor) that this way of conceptualizing the state threatens "that profound sense of settled order and security, without which a society like ours cannot live and grow at all."[98] So delicate and subtle an organism is a state that if even the *sense* of continuity is lost, growth is threatened. Emerson, of course, explicitly intended to "unsettle all things;" how well he succeeded is evidenced, Quentin Anderson argues, by the decay of American culture subsequent to his time.

Arnold searches for a means of arriving at a just centre of authority to counterbalance the passion for freedom that, in his view, beset the English society of his time. He examines each of the social classes through what he calls its "representative men" -- the aristocracy, the middle class, and the working class, and concludes that none of these can provide "an adequate centre of authority." This may seem almost parodic of Emerson's method; I think the identity of phrase is unintended. Then Arnold turns to a concept that sounds, at first, astonishingly like Emerson's notion of the "genuine self," the universal self that is supposedly revealed when the individual follows his or her whim; here is Arnold:

> We want an authority, and we find nothing but

> jealous classes, checks, and a deadlock; culture
> suggests the idea of *the State*. We find no basis
> for a firm State-power in our ordinary selves;
> culture suggests one to us in our *best self*.[99]

Unlike Emerson, however, Arnold sees the "best self" (note that he drops the plural when he moves from "ordinary" to "best") is in no way drawn off and separated from the community; on the contrary it is the very principle on which community can be founded:

> But by our *best self* we are united, imper-
> sonal, at harmony. We are in no peril from giving
> authority to this, because it is the truest friend
> we all of us have; and when anarchy is a danger
> to us, to this authority we may turn with sure
> trust. Well, and this is the very self which culture,
> or the study of perfection, seeks to develop in
> us; at the expense of our old untransformed self,
> taking pleasure only in doing what it likes or is
> used to do, and exposing us to the risk of clashing
> with everyone else who is doing the same![100]

Arnold recognizes (as Emerson does not) that his readers need guidance: how, after all, does one know what one's "best self" is? He gives two "excellent rules": "'Firstly, never go against the best light you have [thus far in agreement with Emerson]; secondly, take care that your light be not darkness."[101] In this latter injunction Arnold does go beyond Emerson who declared his indifference to the question of whether his impulses were divinely or demonically inspired. Arnold fails, however, as did Emerson, to provide any comprehensive standard of judgement, since in a subsequent sentence he suggests that our *conscience* will tell us if our actions are being prompted by our ordinary self or our best self. He does, however, insist upon the state being the "organ of our collective best

self,"[102] and connect institutionalized instruction with the capacity to know one's best self. Thus, a stable and settled community is both the consequence and the protector of the best selves of its members.

Part of Arnold's definition of culture is a willingness to look at an object from all sides. In this too he differs greatly from Emerson, who (in true Unitarian fashion) only affirmed -- different things, it is true, in different places, but that is another matter. Thus Arnold is able to pose the following objection to his scheme:

> 'You make [the State] the organ of something or other, but how can you be certain that reason will be the quality which will be embodied in it?'

And his answer is compelling:

> You cannot be certain of it, undoubtedly, if you never try to bring the thing about; but the question is, the action of the State being the action of the collective nation, and the action of the collective nation carrying naturally great publicity, weight, and force of example with it, whether we should not try to put into the action of the State as much as possible of right reason or our best self, which may, in this manner, come back to us with new force and authority; may have visibility, form, and influence; and help to confirm us, in the many moments when we are tempted to be our ordinary selves merely, in resisting . . . ?[103]

Arnold recognized the pernicious and destructive effects upon society of individualism; Emerson, as we have seen, also recognized that industrialization (which he too connects to the power of individuals) was negatively affecting English society. His admiration of

power, however, stopped his criticisms short, and he failed completely to recognize that his insistence on the absolute value of self-reliance as a means to realizing perfection would lead to equally bleak consequences in America. Arnold, in discussing *English Traits*, isolates Emerson's optimism as the source of its weakness, and perhaps this is so:

> Emerson's systematic benevolence comes from what he himself calls somewhere his 'persistent optimism . . . .' But still let us keep our literary conscience true, and judge every kind of literary work by the laws really proper to it. The kind of work attempted in the *English Traits* . . . is work which cannot be done perfectly with a bias such as that given by Emerson's optimism. . . . [104]

Convinced as he was of the inevitability of the triumph of goodness, of the merely privative existence of evil, Emerson failed consistently to imagine the actual results of a society consisting only of self-reliant selves, each seeking his ends, each using his fellows as means to the end of individual perfection. Hawthorne, in several tales, examines the human consequences of the search for perfection, and I will conclude this discussion of Emersonian perfectibility by examining his contemporary's critique of his work.

[1] Thomas Carlyle, *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* , ed. Joseph Slater (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964) 460.

[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals* , eds. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes,10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1909) 3: 3.

[3] Emerson, *Journals* 3: 171.

[4] Emerson, *English Traits* , *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* , ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 11 vols. (1876, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1903) 5: 5.

[5] Emerson, *Journals* 3: 196.

[6] Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981) 492.

[7] Allen 491.

[8] James Elliott Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 2. vols. (New York: Ams Press, 1965) 2: 494.

[9] Allen 492.

[10] Cabot 2: 561.

[11] William J. Sowder, *Emerson's Impact on the British Isles and Canada* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1966) 26.

[12] Allen 506.

[13] Cabot 2: 508.

[14] Cabot 2: 506 - 507.

[15] Cabot 2: 527 - 528.

[16] Sowder 47.

[17] Cabot 2: 564.

[18] Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953) 94.

[19] Whicher 97.

[20] Emerson, "Circles," *Essays First Series* 2: 307 - 308.

[21] Emerson, "Circles" 318.

[22] Emerson, "Circles" 302.

[23] Emerson, "Circles" 321.

[24] Whicher 114.

[25] Whicher 115.

[26] Emerson, "Experience," *Works* 3: 72.

[27] Whicher 121.

[28] Emerson, "Experience," *Works* 3: 85 - 86.

[29] Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 5.

[30] Ellison 14.

[31] Ellison 8.

[32] Ellison 183.

[33] Ellison 188.

[34] Ellison 188.

[35] Edward W. Emerson, ed. Emerson, *Works* III: n. 302 - 203.

[36] Ellison 10. These remarks are typical of comments on Emerson's prose style; it is intriguing to realize that William Ellery Channing's prose style was described in similar terms; the following passage is taken from the introduction to *The Perfect Life* ("Title and Character of this Book") by W. H. Channing:

> In clear terms, terse phrases, compact sentences, and frequent though varied restatements, he bears his listeners, by easy

> transitions upward, from the level plain of average experience
> to the loftiest summits of speculation, above the discordant
> din of theological controversy and worldly strife, he welcomes
> all to worship the Father face to face . . . .

(In William E. Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* [Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886] 927.)

[37] Ellison 10.

[38] Ellison 168.

[39] Ellison 170.

[40] Ellison 185; the passage is taken from Emerson, "Plato," *Representative Men*, *Works* 4: 55 - 56.

[41] Ellison 187.

[42] Ellison 188 - 189.

[43] Emerson, "The Poet," *Works* 3: 20 - 21.

[44] Emerson, "Nominalist and Realist," *Works* 3: 245.

[45] Emerson, *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* , ed. Joseph Slater (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964) 291.

[46] Thomas Carlyle, *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* ed. Joseph Slater (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964) 295.

[47] Carlyle, *Correspondence* 370 - 371.

[48] Emerson, *Correspondence* 372.

[49] Emerson, *Correspondence* 373.

[50] Emerson, *Works* 5: 35.

[51] Emerson, *Works* 5: 36.

[52] Emerson, *Works* 5: 37.

[53] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State According to the Idea of Each* , ed. John Barrell (1830; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1972) 4.

[54] Coleridge 11.

[55] Coleridge 10.

[56] Coleridge 7.

[57] Emerson, "Race," *Traits* , *Works* 5: 67.

[58] William H. Channing, "Title and Character of this Book," "The Perfect Life," *The Works of William E. Channing, D. D.* [Boston: American Unitarian Society, 1886] 927.

[59] Emerson, *Works* 5: 83.

[60] Emerson, *Works* 5: 93.

[61] Emerson, *Works* 5: 97.

[62] Emerson, *Works* 5: 167.

[63] Maccall, *Critic* 9 Oct. 1858: 653; Sowder 57.

[64] *New Quarterly Review* V (n.m. 1856) 455; Sowder 59.

[65] Emerson, *Works* 5: 183.

[66] Emerson,.*Works* 5: 190.

[67] Emerson, *Works* 5: 196.

[68] Emerson, *Works* 5: 198.

[69] Emerson, *Works* 5: 209.

[70] Emerson, *Works* 5: 211.

[71] Emerson, *Works* 5: 212.

[72] Emerson, *Works* 5: 213.

[73] Emerson, *Works* 5: 214.

[74] Emerson, *Works* 5: 215.

[75] Emerson, *Works* 5: 217. Emerson is here quoting Wordsworth, "Ecclesiastical Sonnet XVII."

[76] Emerson, *Works* 5: 219.

[77] Emerson, *Works* 5: 220.

[78] Emerson, *Works* 5: 220.

[79] Emerson, *Works* 5: 221.

[80] Emerson, *Works* 5: 221 - 222.

[81] Emerson, *Works* 5:222. Emerson is, of course, parodying St. Paul, who told the Romans: "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, lest any man should boast" (Romans 3:23).

[82] Emerson, *Works* 5: 225.

[83] T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," *The Four Quartets* *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems 1909 - 1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952)130 - 137.

[84] Emerson, "Aristocracy," *Traits* , *Works* 5: 189.

[85] Emerson, *Works* 5: 196.

[86] Coleridge 50.

[87] Emerson, "Wealth," *Works* 6: 93.

[88] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 163.

[89] Emerson, *Works* 5: 126.

[90] Emerson, "Circles," *Works* 3:

[91] Coleridge 59.

[92] Coleridge 34.

[93] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* , *Selected Prose* , ed. P. J. Keating (1869; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982) 205.

[94] Arnold 207.

[95] Arnold 208.

[96] Arnold 229.

[97] Arnold 230.

[98] Arnold 235.

[99] Arnold 247.

[100] Arnold 246 - 247.

[101] Arnold 247.

[102] Arnold 248.

[103] Arnold 269 - 270.

[104] Matthew Arnold, "Emerson" 174.

Chapter Six
Hawthorne's Critique of Perfectibility

In this chapter I intend to examine the criticisms of Emerson's notion of perfectibility contained in several of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales. I have chosen to work with the shorter fiction rather than with what may seem the more obvious *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) since that work focusses on communal living -- a form of experimentation in which Emerson, ever the intrepid individualist, had little interest. Hawthorne, of course, was acquainted with Emerson; they were neighbours for the three years that Hawthorne, after his marriage to Sophia Peabody in 1842, rented the Old Manse (in which Emerson himself had lived) -- for fifty dollars a year.[1] Their relationship seems to have been a courteous one, but little more. Given the profound differences in the two writers' most fundamental assumptions about human nature, it was perhaps inevitable that they should have failed to establish a friendship. Certainly Hawthorne found Emerson's approach to life irritating:

> . . . Mr. Emerson -- the mystic, stretching his hand
> out of cloud-land, in vain search for something
> real . . . . Mr. Emerson is a great searcher for facts;
> but they seem to melt away and become unsub-
> stantial in his grasp.[2]

In the sketch "The Celestial Railroad" (1843), Hawthorne contributes to the popular pastime of mocking the Transcendentalists:

> . . . into [the] deserted cave another
> terrible giant has thrust himself, and
> makes it his business to seize upon honest
> travellers and fatten them for his table with
> plentiful meals of smoke, mist, moonshine, raw
> potatoes, and sawdust. He is a German by birth,
> and is called Giant Transcendentalist; but as

> to his form, his features, his substance, and his
> nature generally, it is the chief peculiarity of
> this huge miscreant that neither he for himself,
> nor anybody for him, has ever been able to
> describe them. As we rushed by the cavern's
> mouth we caught a hasty glimpse of him, looking
> somewhat like an ill-proportioned figure, but
> considerably more like a heap of fog and duskiness.
> He shouted after us, but in so strange a phraseology
> that we knew not what he meant, nor whether to
> be encouraged or affrighted.[3]

It is obvious from this that Hawthorne's attitude to Transcendentalism was at best one of amusement; certainly the references to "Mr. Emerson" in his journals are frequently tinged with irony, even mild contempt.

There is one point of contact between the two writers, however, and that is the dissatisfaction each felt with the very aspects of his own personality that fostered his work. Emerson knew himself to be of a cold disposition, little able to enter into the joys and sorrows of others; surely this detachment was a necessary condition for one who would argue so passionately for the sundering of all "horizontal" relationships -- all forms of connectedness that tie us to each other rather than encouraging us to rise above others. The most powerful Journal entries occur early on; as Emerson ages he seems less distressed by this disability. The following is one of the best known of these passages of self-criticism; it is taken from a journal written in 1826:

> Next, it seems I am cold, and when shall I
> kindle? I was born cold. My bodily habit is cold.
> I shiver in and out; don't heat to the good purposes
> called enthusiasm a quarter so quick and kindly

as my neighbours.[4]

Hawthorne recognized, and feared, something akin to this in his own nature -- that his ability to withdraw and observe others while offering no disclosure in return to those he provoked made him little more than a spy or a voyeur. But while Emerson ultimately shrugged off his self-criticisms, Hawthorne struggled with his throughout his career, recognizing both what he gained by this detachment, and what it cost both him (isolation) and its potential for harm (by allowing him to penetrate too deeply into the hearts of others). In the "Preface" to *The Snow Image and Other Twice Told Tales*, Hawthorne comments directly on these concerns, warning that "a person, who has been burrowing . . .into the depths of our common nature, for the purposes of psychological romance," must combine "the tact of sympathy" with "the light of observation."[5] This deep concern with the sanctity of the other, coupled with the psychological penetration that enabled Hawthorne to imaginatively and sympathetically grasp the motives and needs that drive his characters, give Hawthorne's prose a value lacking in much, but decidedly not all, of Emerson's.

Emerson's most sustained description of Hawthorne occurs in the Journal entry in which he describes Hawthorne's funeral. Like most of his sketches of his contemporaries it is striking for its clarity, perception, and generosity -- to know that Emerson was capable of such insight and precision is to regret anew his decision to continue in a (pseudo)ministerial career. One wishes that he had chosen to be a biographer (think of his sketches of his friend Thoreau and Aunt Mary Moody Emerson) -- a genre in which his weaknesses as a writer and thinker would have been curbed by the necessity of careful and sustained attention to his subject. As I noted in my discussion of *English Traits*, when Emerson was forced to give his subject his full attention, when the occasion of his writing did not permit transcendence to occur, his prose is marked by the very qualities whose absence I regret in his most influential works.

In reflecting on Hawthorne's funeral, Emerson declares that he "thought [Hawthorne] a greater man than any of his works betray."[6] This is perhaps not surprising since Emerson shared with the other Transcendentalists a deep distrust of novels.[7] It is notable that the Transcendentalists ignored the novel as a form, turning instead to sermons (those who remained within the church) or to essayistic forms that owed much in intent and form to the Unitarian sermons they professedly abhorred. Their distaste was motivated, no doubt, by various concerns, but chief among them was what they felt to be the unfitness of the novel (with its concern for details of actual life) as a means of urging transcendence. Emerson discussed the novel as a form briefly in a journal entry written when he was twenty-one years of age. He concludes that they are written "for coxcombs and deficient persons," that they are aimed at "the great body of society who make up nations and conduct the business of the world" but fail to offer any needed moral instruction."[8] The aims of the Transcendentalists were derived largely from their religious (Unitarian) background and training; thus they sought forms in which they could express their pietistic yearnings and engage in moral suasion. Lawrence Buell has demonstrated the connections of Transcendental prose to Unitarian sermonizing incontrovertibly; he notes:

> In retrospect, it would appear that the Transcendentalist literati were in a doubly anomalous position, in relation to their times. On the one hand, they were in advance of their public in claiming more for the role of the poet than most of New England was prepared to admit. But on the other hand, they were also in a sense seeking to preserve the Puritan conception of the literary life in an era when that conception was fast becoming extinct. In picturing the role of the Poet in essentially religious terms, the Transcendentalist sought, in effect, to subsume

> their aesthetic impulses within the traditional theo-
> centric framework of New England culture. As a result,
> in many ways they have more in common with
> Timothy Dwight and Edward Taylor than with the
> newly emerging class of literary professionals, such as
> . . . Hawthorne and Melville.[9]

Certainly the Emersonian program of assertion and transcendence have little in common, as I have just suggested, with the this-worldly concerns of Hawthorne. Emerson's disinterest in community and failure to recognize the sanctity of the other (in his overwhelming concern for the sanctity of the self) contrast explicitly with two of Hawthorne's greatest themes. And Emerson's cheerful view of evil as merely "privative," a matter which corrected vision can eradicate, is in complete opposition to Hawthorne's more sombre vision. The depth of the differences between the two writers has been commented upon several times. Quentin Anderson makes the contrast in *The Imperial Self* arguing that, unlike Emerson, Hawthorne views society as a "reciprocal affair,"[10] that to him

> . . . life is rootedly reciprocal, that people are
> known through relationships with other people,
> and that the fantasies we try to enact, the
> aspirations we express, the religious convictions
> we uphold, are to be praised or dispraised on the
> ground that they foster or impoverish our relation-
> ships with those around us.[11]

While Anderson focusses on the views of social relationships that separate Emerson and Hawthorne as thinkers, R. W. B. Lewis (in *The American Adam : Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*) contrasts the two thinkers' attitudes to the past, with Emerson representing Hope and the Future; Hawthorne Memory

and the Past (the terms Lewis borrows from Emerson). While Lewis recognizes that the Emersonian dismissal of the past has resulted in what he calls a series of one generation cultures, he can also see a value in Emersonian optimism; it

> . . . managed to provide occasions for reflection and invention, for a testing of moral and artistic possibilities. The illusion of freedom from the past led to a more real relation to the continuing tradition. The vision of innocence stimulated [in others] a positive and original sense of tragedy. Without that illusion, we are conscious, no longer of tradition, but simply and coldly of the burden of history. And without the vision, we are left, not with a mature tragic spirit, but merely with a sterile awareness of evil uninvigorated by a sense of loss. For the notion of original sin draws its compelling strength from the prior notion of original innocence.[12]

Lewis here gives the Emersonian enterprise a value in so far as it was superseded, but I would question the extent to which Emersonian notions simply became the necessary catalyst for deeper thought. Anderson's points out that for Hawthorne to find a background against which his social tragedies could be enacted, he had to look to the past; the Boston of the present was already inadequate to sustain the reciprocal conception of society Hawthorne dramatized.[13] This seems to suggest that society was directly, and adversely, affected by Emerson's ideals. In "The Celestial Railway," Hawthorne specifically criticizes the optimism that enabled the Transcendentalists to believe in the perfectibility of the individual -- the self-sufficiency of the individual. His choice of the railway as the form of transportation chosen by the modern pilgrims in his fable is apt; Emerson was always fascinated by steam power, recognizing that "Machinery and

Transcendentalism agree well"[14] -- both, after all, being examples of inadequately understood power inexorably driving an established society in directions it was incapable of either understanding or controlling.

The speaker in "The Celestial Railway" is escorted on his journey to the Celestial City by "one Mr. Smooth-it-away." Mr. Smooth-it-away points out to his companion "the famous Slough of Despond," over which, he claims, a safe bridge has recently been erected. Its foundations were secured by the expedient of

> . . . throwing into the slough some editions of books
> of morality; volumes of French philosophy and
> German rationalism; tracts, sermons, and essays
> of modern clergymen; extracts from Plato, Confucius,
> and various Hindoo sages, together with a few
> ingenious commentaries upon texts of Scripture, --
> all of which by some scientific process, have been
> converted into a mass like granite.[15]

The sketch concludes with the narrator realizing that Mr. Smooth-it-away, who had convinced his willing listener of the non-existence of evil, was himself aflame with the fires of hell:

> And then did my excellent friend Mr. Smooth-
> it-away laugh outright, in the midst of which ca-
> chination a smoke-wreath issued from his mouth
> and nostrils, while a twinkle of lurid flame darted
> out of either eye, proving indubitably that his
> heart was all of a red blaze. The impudent fiend!
> To deny the existence of Tophet, when he felt
> its fiery tortures raging within his breast.[16]

This sketch suggests not only the contemptuous amusement with which Hawthorne viewed his Transcendental contemporaries, but also his conviction that their view of human nature was false, both in itself, and, more significantly, to their own experience.

What is implied here is that Mr. Smooth-it-away, who knew otherwise, intentionally draws innocent young seekers on literal fools' errands, that end with their spiritual disillusionment and isolation. The speaker is left on a "steam ferry boat, the last improvement on this important route," from which he tries to escape upon realizing that his conductor on the journey is a "fiend." He cannot: "the wheels . . . threw a dash of spray over me so cold -- so deadly cold, with the chill that will never leave those waters" and rouse him from his dream. The awakened speaker is relieved to realize the "unreality" of his journey: "Thank Heaven it was a Dream!"[17] -- but Hawthorne's readers are surely meant to read that closing statement ironically; it is the final naivete of the speaker that he can dismiss so quickly a fable that should enable him to understand the spiritual dangers inherent in the prevailing philosophy.

Emerson himself wasn't born with the sanguine attitude to evil that characterizes his "mature" thought. At the age of eighteen, his thought was conventional. He asks himself why "a good Providence" has permitted "the existence of evil," and answers:

> What is evil? There is an answer from every corner of this globe -- from every mountain and valley and sea. The enslaved, the sick, the disappointed, the poor, the unfortunate, the dying the surviving, cry out, It is here. Every man points to his own dwelling or strikes his breast to say, It is here. . . .
>
> What is its origin? The sin which Adam brought into the world and entailed upon his children.[18]

This line of thought is obviously incompatible with perfectibility; the man who is part and parcel of God can surely not strike his breast and cry out that evil is here, and within a year (at age nineteen) Emerson has discovered a value for evil. He acknowledges the wisdom "of the Creator in placing man in a probationary state," and continues:

> We do not seek with vain ambition to question
> the abstruse and unsearchable ground of this
> ordination, because it is plain matter of fact
> that we are incompetent to the discussion. This
> being assumed, there is no longer any doubt of
> the Divine Benevolence arising from the
> existence of Evil. Evil is the rough and stony
> foundation of human Virtue; weaning man away
> from the seductive dangers of vicious, transient,
> destructive pleasures to a hold and security of
> Paradise where they are perpetual and perfect.[19]

This rather glib formulation becomes the basis of compensation, the notion that all actions will receive their appropriate reward. It is rather alarming to think that a philosopher whose ideas have been so profoundly influential had formulated his philosophy by the age of nineteen, and Gatsby-like, lived by its lights until his death.

Correspondence is another of the fundamental Emersonian ideas; in a number of tales Hawthorne either satirized or explored the notion that all "facts" have spiritual meanings. In "The Great Carbuncle," for example, amongst the persons obsessed with finding the fabled gem is a poet, who "by a . . . mistake, made prize of a great piece of ice, which he found in a sunless chasm of the mountains, and swore that it corresponded, in all points, with his idea of the Great Carbuncle." Hawthorne suggests that if the correspondence wasn't complete, it was telling: "The critics say, that, if his poetry lacked the splendor of the gem, it retained all the coldness of the ice."[20]

Hawthorne's tendency towards allegory could be seen as a form of correspondence, but it must be remembered that Emerson's idea depends on there being a fluid (he repudiated the precise and rigid connections Swedenborg postulated between natural objects and spiritual facts[21]) but absolute relationship between any object and its meaning. What Emerson believed to be a fact of the relationship between the two realms of being, Hawthorne used as a literary device. In an extraordinary literary achievement, "Rappaccini's Daughter," Hawthorne succeeds in creating a tale in which objects are gradually imbued with such significance as to seem to represent spiritual qualities, while maintaining a complexity of meaning as subtle as that of life itself. Furthermore, he does this in a tale that successfully explores the impossibility of judging by correspondence, inviting his readers to engage in the very activity he shows them to be futile. The problem he presents in the tale is a fascinating one; it has been analyzed from one perspective by Michael J. Colacurcio in his article "A Better Mode of Evidence: The Transcendental Problem of Faith and Spirit."

Colacurcio begins his essay by noting that in the nineteenth century the previously accepted proofs of faith were no longer held by many persons, but disbelief was not an attractive alternative to most of these. No longer could thinking persons accept "unproven propositions" on "proven authority": arguments from authority were no longer tenable. In the United States, Unitarian theology was based on "supernatural naturalism," the belief that a rational religion ultimately rested on supernatural proofs, the "external evidences" of revelation and miracle. Transcendentalists denied both these possibilities (Emerson in the notorious *Divinity School Address*) and developed to replace them the notion of faith as direct spiritual insight. According to the Transcendentalists, what signifies in matters of faith is not external evidences but rather what one's own moral consciousness recognizes as good; the "locus of belief is in consciousness and not in a historical event."[22] Channing, as we saw earlier in this study, believed in correspondences between the yearnings of the human soul to do good and the God who gives goodness its being, but in spite of this pulpit eloquence, he continued to insist that religious belief rested

on the external evidences of revelation and miracles. To the Transcendentalists, this constituted a denial of the absolute dignity of man. George Ripley (with whose work Colacurcio's article is concerned) engaged in a debate on the subject with the fiery Andrews Norton; the following is a passage from a letter to Norton published by Ripley in *The Boston Daily Advertiser* in 1836:

> The evidence of miracles depends on a previous belief in Christianity, rather than the evidence of Christianity on a previous belief in miracles. In presenting the argument for our faith to an unbeliever, I would begin with establishing its coincidence with the divine testimony of our spiritual nature; and having done that I would proceed to shew the probability of miracles.[23]

Not only do miracles depend on internal evidences, however; Ripley also presented the argument that the inner nature recognizes truth because it (truth) corresponds to a truth inherent in the soul.[24]

Indeed, in a pamphlet entitled *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion Addressed to Doubters Who Wish to Believe* he claimed that nature itself seen with properly spiritualized eyes will yield spiritual truths:

> The material universe is the expression of an Invisible Wisdom and Power. It has its origin in the will of the Infinite . . . . The creation in itself, without reference to the Almighty Spirit from which it sprung, is formless and without order . . . . It is only when its visible glory leads our minds to its unseen Author . . . that we can truly comprehend its character and designs. To the eye of sense, what does the external creation present?

Much less than we are generally apt to suppose. . . .

Ripley continues by warning of the folly of confining "our attention merely to the outward form, and [forgetting] the inward spirit, which it represents."[25] Two levels of experience must, then, be combined: the material and the spiritual, and the material must be recognized as the "husk" of the spiritual "*which it represents* ."

"Rappaccini's Daughter," as Collacurcio shows, takes Ripley's ideas and puts them to the test: what if the miracle *isn't* good, what if, for example, Beatrice is malignant by every evidence of our senses, but our intuitive judgement of her is that she is perfect? The plot of "Rappaccini's Daughter" is of course familiar: a young student, Giovanni, rents rooms overlooking an exotic garden dominated by a remarkable plant in its centre. In this garden, the scientist Rappaccini (rival of Giovanni's mentor, Professor Baglioni) has perfected an experiment: he has created a flower as beautiful as its scent is deadly, and he has enabled his equally beautiful daughter Beatrice to tend to the plant by instilling in her a breath as poisonous. Giovanni is thus presented with an epistemological and spiritual problem: is Beatrice good (he is intuitively certain that she is) or evil (empirical tests Giovanni performs convince him that she is). Giovanni yearns to believe that "all this ugly mystery was but an earthly illusion, and that, whatever mist of evil might seem to have gathered over her, the real Beatrice was a heavenly angel." But Giovanni finds himself incapable of "such high [transcendental] faith;" he yields to his doubts and, interfering with Beatrice's nature by demanding that she drink an antidote given him by Baglioni, causes her death. The tale presents fascinating problems -- freshmen love to study it, partly because of their irresistible sympathies for all teenagers suffering under the tyranny of restrictive parents, but also because of the consummate skill with which Hawthorne explores Giovanni's problem. What if the outer fails to correspond to the inner? Beatrice is beautiful, but her essence is poisonous -- or is it? Would the eyes of faith (Hawthorne tells us that Giovanni "had not a deep heart[26]") have seen more truly? Hawthorne contrasts the faith that would have enabled Giovanni to believe with the distrust

or "earthly doubts"[27] that prevent him. Giovanni, unlike the two scientific experimenters of the tale, presents us with emotions with which we can relate: being all of us prone to doubt, how would we (how do we) judge Beatrice? She herself assures Giovanni that she is innocent ("my spirit is God's creature"[28]), and pleads with him to disregard the evidences of his senses: "'If true to the outward senses, still it may be false in its essence.'"[29] In other words, when correspondence fails, we are to trust to inner rather than outer evidences. Obviously, this is something that most of us are incapable of doing, and to have done so in Giovanni's case would have been to court permanent banishment from society, at best existing with Beatrice "in an utter solitude, which would be made none the less solitary by the densest throng of human life." But Giovanni, the "weak, and selfish, and unworthy spirit,"[30] cannot accommodate the mixture of goodness and evil that Beatrice represents to him; he offers her the antidote that he has received from Baglioni, and, like Georgiana in "The Birthmark," the perfected Beatrice dies.

"Rappaccini's Daughter" is only one in a series of stories in which the central figure is a scientist determined to inflict his vision of perfection on his beloved. In "Rappaccini's Daughter," Hawthorne's target is explicitly the empirical scientist driven to treat the other as an object on which his scientific needs entitle him to experiment. In two other tales, Hawthorne blends the scientific desire to engage in experimentation with the artistic desire to achieve perfection. In "The Birthmark" and "The Artist of the Beautiful," Hawthorne analyses the consequences of the transcendentalist search for perfection. In the second of these two works, Hawthorne treats the troubles of the artist who seeks perfection.

The hero of "The Artist of the Beautiful" is an apprentice watchmaker. Throughout, Owen is contrasted with his former schoolmate, Robert Danforth, a blacksmith who represents the world of iron, of reality, and utilitarian philosophy. Owen is engaged in a secret pursuit: "to put the very spirit of beauty into form and give it

motion";[31] he is driven in his quest by his love for Annie Hovenden, the daughter of his former master, Peter Hovenden. His love of her

Hawthorne presents as the inevitable hope of

> the prophet, the poet, the reformer, the criminal,
> or any other man with human yearnings, but
> separated from the multitude by a peculiar lot . . . .[32]

He longs to gain her sympathetic love; she proves unable to understand his dreams and ambitions. Hawthorne suggests that "had she been enlightened by the deep intelligence of love,"[33] she might not have disappointed him. In this formulation, so different from Emerson's, love is the enabler of sympathetic intelligence, of the desire and ability of the lover to transcend the limits of his or her subjectivity.

But Annie does not love Owen, she loves Robert, the representative of physical strength and practicality. Like Gatsby, who in the absence of all evidence, believed in Daisy's single-minded devotion, Owen forgets that Annie "had shown herself incapable of any deep response," and he persists "in connecting all his dreams of artistical success with Annie's image." She becomes for him "the visible shape in which the spiritual power that he worshipped, and on whose altar he hoped to lay a not unworthy offering, was made manifest to him." "Of course," Hawthorne comments, "he had deceived himself; there were no such attributes in Annie Hovenden as his imagination had endowed her with."[34] Because Annie marries Robert, she remains forever "the angel of his life [who] had been snatched away and given to a rude man of earth and iron"[35]-- she never, as a consequence, becomes the real, but limited, Annie Hovenden. Owen passes through all the vicissitudes of a disappointed lover and artist: he gives up his dreams and succeeds in practical life; he becomes cynical and mocks his former hopes; he turns to wine to stimulate himself; yet finally, he is somehow revivified, and, unlike most, it becomes "his fortune, good or ill, to achieve the purpose of his life."[36]

The object that throughout the tale represents the search of the artist for the beautiful has been the butterfly. In the midst of his despair, it was the sight of a butterfly that enabled him to return to his quest, and Hawthorne speculates that

> It might be fancied that the bright butterfly,
> which had come so spirit-like into the window as
> Owen sat with the rude revellers, was indeed a
> spirit commissioned to recall him to the pure,
> ideal life that had so etherealized him among men.
> It might be fancied that he went forth to seek
> this spirit in its sunny haunts . . . . [37]

And so, when Owen does succeed in his attempt to "put the very spirit of beauty into form and give it motion" it is a butterfly that he creates. This object symbolizes "a lofty moral by a material trifle, -- converting what was earthly to spiritual gold."[38] He takes the delicate mechanism to the home of Annie and Robert Danford. His audience there consists of the old watchmaker, who has "just enough penetration to torture Owen's soul with the bitterness of worldly criticism,"[39] Robert Danford, Annie, and their infant son -- in whose face Owen imagines a resemblance to "Peter Hovenden's habitual ['malicious'] expression."[40] The child ("a little personage who had come mysteriously out of the infinite but with something so sturdy and real in his composition that he seemed moulded out of the densest substance"[41]) ultimately catches the butterfly and crushes it in his hand, to the horror of Annie and the amusement of Peter. But

> as for Owen Warland, he looked placidly at what
> seemed the ruin of his life's labor, and which was
> yet no ruin. He had caught a far other butterfly
> than this. When the artist rose high enough to
> achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he
> made it perceptible to mortal senses became of

> little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed
> itself in the enjoyment of the reality.[42]

This tale sympathetically presents the pain and rapture of the artist who seeks to create an ultimately beautiful object and who, in doing so, comes into contact with the ideal of which his creation is merely a symbol; consequently, he ceases to value the object he has created with so much anguish. But qualifying Hawthorne's sympathy is of course his choice of the object itself. Owen has spent his life chasing butterflies; in the end, not even the butterfly has any value for him.

It is amusing to note that Emerson, too, chased butterflies; certainly he shared Owen's contemptuous disinterest in the material once the spiritual had been attained. When David Greene Haskins (related to Emerson through Emerson's mother, Ruth Haskins) asked Emerson "various questions," the great man answered

> . . . with great minuteness of detail. He explained
> to me his mode of composing. He said that usually,
> after breakfast, he went to walk in the woods in
> pursuit of a thought; very much as boys go out in
> summer to catch butterflies. He was not always
> successful, any more than the boys were. But, when
> successful, no boy was ever happier with his
> butterfly than he with his thought. Having cap-
> tured his thought, he put a pin through it, and
> took it home, and placed it in his collection. He
> explained that he made a note of his thought;
> but, generally, only in his mind; and that he kept
> what he called a Thought Book, in which he
> entered each thought, having first worked it
> over and clothed it in fitting garb. Sometimes

> he would go again in the afternoon into the woods, and there, or perhaps by the roadside, would find another thought, which he would treat in the same manner. But this was exceptional. He was satisfied if he succeeded in securing one thought a day. The thoughts were entered one after another in the Thought Book, without regard to their connection. Whenever he wished to write an essay or a lecture, he made free use of the Thought Book, selecting and adapting such thoughts as seemed fitting, and stringing them together as a child strings beads on a thread. After this explanation, I was at no loss to account for the mosaic character of much of his writing.[43]

Hawthorne's tale demands that we take seriously, at least for the moment, the idea of the artist as a chaser of butterflies, and yet the image itself is part of Hawthorne's challenge to his reader: he forces us to consider the plight of the transcendental artist in one of its more extreme forms. Owen is presented with sympathy but never sentimentality; Hawthorne shows both the virtue of Owen's singleminded devotion to the creation of beauty and the defect of that virtue: his willing detachment from social and familial connections. Once Owen has succeeded in his quest, he no longer requires what he knows he can never have: the sympathetic approval of his society.

The tale rests in part on the premise that although "the character of Owen's mind was microscopic, his "sense of beauty" was not "thereby diminished into a sense of prettiness": [t]he beautiful idea has no relation to size."[44] And yet, the tale seems to be to be tinged with Peter Hovendon's contempt: Owen is both physically and emotionally weak,

he cannot accurately judge others (although he frequently intuitively and uncharitably assesses them), and he is incapable of integrating with society. In one of his final reactions to the group gathered at "Robert Danforth's fireside circle," "the artist smiled and kept the secret to himself."[45] The arrogance that motivates such a dismissal of his audience is both unpleasant and the result of Owen's transcendental experience. Like Emerson, whose attitude to the "rabble" is often disquieting, Owen is contemptuous of those who constitute his society, even of Annie, for whom he harbours a secret love. Only in Robert Danford, Owen's former classmate, do we have an image of the (practical) artist connected to society -- and yet he too is limited, incapable of grasping the value of the beautiful.

In direct contrast to "The Artist of the Beautiful," the hero of "The Birthmark," Aylmer, is presented as a scientist, a powerful man capable of establishing a meaningful intercourse with the world. And yet his quest is one with which the poet-philosopher Emerson (and the beauty-seeking Owen) would have been wholly sympathetic:

> In those days when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy. The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial aliment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself.[46]

Aylmer is not only a scientist; he is also one of its "ardent votaries"[47] and a philosopher; certainly the assumptions that inform his choices and motivate his ambitions are as much religious and philosophical as they are scientific. What Hawthorne describes here is precisely the Emersonian program: ascension, power, and the creation and possession of new worlds.

These are Aylmer's ambitions; he marries a young woman named Georgiana, an exceptionally beautiful woman on whose "left cheek there was a singular mark . . . . Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size."[48] The mark functions as an index, with persons sympathetic to Georgiana finding it beautiful; those jealous of her claim it destroys her beauty. And to some, it simply represents the one flaw in her "ideal loveliness." But for Aylmer the mark becomes a sign, a symbol of his wife's participation in fallen human nature:

> It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature,
> in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably
> on all her productions, either to imply that they
> are temporary and finite, or that their perfection
> must be wrought by toil and pain. . . . In this manner,
> selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to
> sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre
> imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark
> a frightful object, causing him more trouble and
> horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of
> soul or sense, had given him delight.[49]

Hawthorne makes it clear that if Aylmer is the victim of his diseased imagination he is also a willful participant in its "sombre" imaginings: he "selects" the birthmark as a symbol of qualities that constitute, not his wife's humanity, but her imperfection. Indeed, the mark becomes explicitly for him "the symbol of imperfection"[50] and he determines to remove it.

Georgiana suggests that he do so, even though she fears what might be the consequences, since his loathing of it is intolerable to her. During the course of his experiment, she reads the history of his scientific experiments:

> The book, in truth, was both the history and emblem of his ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life. He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul.[51]

And yet, these very successes become failures, "if compared with the ideal at which he aimed":

> His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his reach .... It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair which assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part.[52]

Aylmer's despair seems the natural response to the perpetual frustration of the transcendental thinker with the limitations of the actual. And as Julie Ellison has shown, when Emerson failed to achieve transcendence, when "the earthly part" refused to be transformed into its spiritual counterpart, he too experienced something akin to Aylmer's despair.[53] That such moments are relatively rare in Emerson we may attribute to the

sanguine temperament he claimed for himself on so many occasions -- it seems also plausible to me that the infrequency of such sober reflections is the result of an imaginative failure, an inability to consider what might be the human price of transcendence.

Georgiana accepts her husband's aspirations; praying that:

> . . . for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest
> and deepest conception. Longer than a moment
> she well knew it could not be; for his spirit was
> ever on the march, ever ascending, and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the
> instant before.[54]

Hawthorne here presents Georgiana's endorsement of her husband's aims, and yet the language Hawthorne uses undercuts her testimonial: the militaristic phrase ("ever on the march") suggests an indifference to what (or whom) it has to march over. The words "required something that was beyond" admit to the depth of the seekers' need: he *requires* this movement, and is condemned to perpetual restlessness as he pursues it. It is described only as "something"; surely the word ironically undercuts the glories implied by the notion of spiritual ascension.

In this instance, his quest ends with the death of his "now perfect" wife; Hawthorne comments:

> . . . had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he
> need not thus have flung away the happiness
> which would have woven his mortal life of the
> selfsame texture with the celestial. The momentary
> circumstance was too strong for him; he failed
> to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and,
> living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect
> future in the present.[55]

Hawthorne here suggests that by refusing to accept human imperfection, by his inability to recognize that in life the mortal and the celestial are interwoven, Aylmer has lost the opportunity of connecting "the perfect future" to an actual present. What Hawthorne describes in this tale, increasing isolation leading to what is surely a form of madness and to the destruction of the beloved seems to me to be precisely what would follow upon the application of Emersonian ideals to one's relationships.

The essay "Love" in *Essays First Series* is taken almost verbatim from his lecture with the same title, the fourth in the series "Human Culture." He opens it by declaring that love ensures the continuance of society;

it

> seizes on a man at one period and works a revolution
> in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges
> him to the domestic and civic relations, carries
> him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the
> power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds
> to his character heroic and sacred attributes,
> establishes marriage and gives permanence to
> human society.[56]

Emerson continues by admitting that this emotion, when viewed in retrospect, becomes "defaced and disfigured";

> Let any man go back to those delicious relations
> which make the beauty of his life, which have
> given him sincerest instruction and nourishment,
> he will shrink and moan. Alas! I know not why,
> but infinite compunctions embitter in mature
> life the remembrances of budding joy, and cover
> every beloved name. Every thing is beautiful

> seen from the point of view of the intellect, or
> as truth. But all is sour if seen as experience.
> Details are melancholy . . . . In the actual world --
> the painful kingdom of time and place -- dwell
> care and canker and fear.[57]

Certainly this is Aylmer's experience: intimacy with Georgiana transforms her from the perfect beloved into the imperfectly human. Like Giovanni, Aylmer finds himself unable to accept the intermingling of good and evil that characterizes all of humanity -- like Emerson, his desire for and belief in the attainability of perfection is so compelling that rather than submit to the mixed nature of humanity, of the beloved, he chooses to subject her to experiments that succeed in eradicating her flaw, but at the expense of her life. Like Beatrice, Georgiana's mark of imperfection is emblematic of her humanity; without it she is indeed perfect, but can no longer live. Both women die at the hands of their professed lovers; the image is powerful and horrific. In no sense does Emerson recommend that the inevitably disillusioned lover engage in any attempt to perfect the beloved. That he should not do so ought not to be surprizing. Emerson disliked the notion of reform, believing that the only true reformation of society would occur through the self-improvement of individuals. He addressed only self-reliant souls, only the genuine individual self, whose isolation from the rest of society he tends to increase. Hawthorne's heroes shock us by their willingness to impose their vision on the women they love; Emerson's aggression takes a more passive form: the other is merely transcended. In an 1842 Journal entry, Emerson comments:

> Intellect always puts an interval between
> the subject and the object. Affection would blend
> the two. For weal or for woe, I clear myself from
> the thing I contemplate: I grieve, but am not a grief.
> I love, but am not a love.

> Marriage in what is called the spiritual world is
> impossible, because of the inequality between
> every subject and every object . . . . [58]

The separation of subject and object on which Emerson comments here was to many Romantics a necessary and potentially tragic condition of consciousness. Emerson's phrase "For weal or for woe" is disturbing in this context, seemingly expressing an indifference to the possible cost and consequences of the separation of self from subject. It is similar to his overly easy declaration of indifference to the question of whether his impulses are from God or the Devil. Surely to the responsible thinker, it matters very much indeed whether it is "[f]or weal or for woe," and surely it matters equally that the self-reliant soul be provided with some means of determining whether his whims are godly or demonic.

One of Hawthorne's most compelling images of the consequences of rejecting community occurs in "Young Goodman Brown," the only one of these tales to predate Hawthorne's acquaintance with Emerson. It doesn't, however, predate Emerson's resignation from the pulpit of Old North, a resignation motivated by Emerson's reluctance to administer or partake in the Lord's Supper. In this tale, Goodman Brown journeys into the centre of the forest, in the company of an individual ominously like the Devil himself. As they travel, Goodman Brown continually resolves to return to his village of Salem, but as he travels he meets more and more of his respected townsfolk, all of them traveling to the same unnamed destination as himself. Since his motive is evil; so must theirs be, and his trust in the pillars of his society is shaken -- and destroyed when he believes he sees his wife, Faith, apparently flying overhead towards the centre of the forest. His last restraint lost, Goodman Brown hurls himself forward until he arrives at what proves to be a communion service apparently attended by everyone he has known and revered from his youth. They are welcomed by "the dark figure, 'to the communion of your race.'" This unnamed form offers to Goodman Brown and a "veiled female" (Faith) the opportunity to

participate in a communion that will open to them, "'[b]y the sympathy of your human hearts for sin'" the power to "'penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin.'" The narrator then rephrases the fiend's offer: "they might be partakers of the mystery of sin, more conscious of the secret guilt of others, both in deed and thought, than they could now be of their own."[59] The communion offered is a hideous one, and Goodman Brown through a tremendous effort of will cries out "'Faith! Faith! . . . look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.'" He then finds himself alone in the forest and the night. Whether what happened to Goodman Brown was a dream or not is inconsequential: what he saw revealed to him that what binds human beings together is their shared sinful nature. He refused the communion -- refused to admit his own participation in fallen human nature -- and the rest of his life is spent mistrusting and suspecting his fellows; he dies in a graceless state of isolation and gloom. When Emerson rejected communion it was with no such consequences; he continued to interact with his society, to be visited, to visit, to travel, to lecture, to preach even, and certainly to lecture and write. But as Winters, Anderson and Parkes have all independently pointed out, Emerson rejected his society while functioning within it; he provided the means for destroying it while enjoying the security and stability it gave him. While Hawthorne could see clearly what would be the effects of denying the subtle and powerful webs that connect us to others, Emerson was blithely cutting them. The refusal to administer the communion service that marked the beginning of his career as an independent thinker, speaker, and essayist symbolizes both his self-directed search for perfection and his (it is, as I hope I have shown, a connected issue) rejection of community.

When Emerson does think about the relationship of society to solitude, his reflections are predictable. In 1825, at age twenty-one, he considered the subject in a fairly lengthy Journal passage. The passage begins by postulating an argument between "you," the developing thinker (Emerson himself), and unnamed "reformers." The reformers present the argument against solitude; the speaker gives the arguments for the young

thinker, who is also described as a Stoic. To enter "the foolish procession" of society is to lose all power as a "prophet and rescuer to a thousand of your brothers." To be able to speak with power, the Stoic must remain aloof from society. Only thus can the thinker hope to "nurse" his "solitary faculties into a self-existence so that [his] thoughts and actions shall be in a degree [his] own." In a well-known passage (in which he echoes Milton) the young Emerson attempts to modify his prescription:

> I commend no absurd sacrifices. I praise no wolfish
> misanthropy that retreats to thickets from cheerful
> towns, and scrapes the ground for roots and acorns,
> either out of a grovelling soul, or a hunger for
> glory that has mistaken grimace for philosophy.

This passage may seem to imply that Emerson did indeed seek a meaningful dialogue with society, but not so:

> It is not the solitude of place, but the solitude of
> soul which is so inestimable to us.[60]

Had Emerson only argued for "the solitude of place," his philosophy would perhaps have suffered the fate of so many other products of America's years of ferment. But he proposed something far more subtle, seductive and dangerous: "solitude of soul." Aylmer and Goodman Brown both become solitary souls; Emerson proposes at the end of this passage that "society is more delicious to the occasional absentee."[61] How he expected that a society consisting of genuine men, self-reliant individuals, and solitary souls would continue to function so that its "unswaddled, unchained"[62] members could return to it as and when they wished, he never discusses; the problem seems never to have occurred to him.

The Great Gatsby was one such soul. Like Owen Warland, he squandered his love on a woman who was incapable of comprehending him, having projected his own impossible dreams of perfection onto her. Ultimately, neither Owen nor Gatsby, neither

Giovanni nor Aylmer care for the reality of their beloved; in each case she exists only to satisfy their yearnings for perfection. Each lover responds differently to his disappointment: by refusing to recognize it, by transcending it, by attempting to alter the flawed symbol of perfection. And each lover finds himself functioning on the outside of society, doomed by his search for perfection to live without the connections that could sustain and control his yearnings. In his essay "Circles," Emerson triumphantly announces

> I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred;
> none are profane; I simply experiment, an end-
> less seeker with no Past at my back.[63]

The only constant he will admit is "some principle of fixture or stability in the soul." It is obvious that some such "principle or fixture" functioned in Emerson; his confidence and sanity even in the midst of his philosophical experimenting attest to that. But his program ensured the further disintegration of the culture that produced and protected him. *The Great Gatsby,* a novel written only forty odd years after Emerson's death, provides more than sufficient evidence of the effects of Emersonian perfectionism. It closes with Nick Carraway's recognition that endless seeking gives no joy, and that however ruthlessly we choose to ignore the past, it continues to control our future:

> And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown
> world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first
> picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock.
> He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his
> dream must have seemed so close that he could
> hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was
> already behind him, somewhere back in that vast
> obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of
> the republic rolled on under the night.
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the

> orgiastic future that year by year recedes before
> us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter --
> tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our
> arms further . . . . And one fine morning --
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current,
> borne back ceaselessly into the past.[64]

It is surely to this, more than anything, that Emersonian perfectibility leads. Jay Gatsby is motivated by an empty dream; self-reliant and confident of his ability to create himself, he pursues a life of crime; inspired by his conviction that he can force Daisy to correspond to his idealized vision of her, he squanders his one experience of a love that might have led him into a meaningful communion with his society. Jay Gatsby functions in a society consisting entirely of other dislocated, more or less self-reliant individuals, all of whom desperately depend on money and power to maintain the apparent perfection of their morally vapid lives. The Great Gatsby alone has a dream; it is a masterstroke on the part of Fitzgerald that the Emersonian dream that gives Gatsby life should be an empty one. He dies in the garden behind an empty house that perfectly mimics the homes built by cultures now defunct. The culture Emerson set out to replace with perfected, self-reliant souls has indeed been superseded.

[1] Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981) 403.

[2] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (n.p.: Ohio State University, 1932) 335 - 337.

[3] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Selected Tales and Sketches*, ed. Hyatt H. Waggoner, 3rd. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970) 484.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals*, eds. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1912) 2: 123.

[5] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," *The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales*,*Selected Tales* 590.

[6] Emerson in James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 2 vols. (New York: Ams Press, 1965) 1: 376 - 377.

[7] The following remarks are from a Journal entry made in 1826:

> Fictions, whether of the theorist or poet, have their value as ornaments; but when they intrude into the place of facts, they do infinite injury, inasmuch as it is only by the perception and comparison of Truth that we can perceive and enjoy the harmonies of the system of human destinies which the Deity is accomplishing from age to age. (*Journals* 2: 87)

[8] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 13. Taylor Stoehr, in *Nay-Saying in Concord*, makes the following argument:

> For their part, the transcendentalists thought that novels were more or less despicable. Their sporadic samplings of Jane Austen and Dickens were

> rarely matters for congratulation; they came away as one comes away from the experience of watching television, vaguely defiled. I think this reaction was a revulsion from what they felt to be an abuse of the imagination. The abuse consisted in abandoning the attempt to make thought bear on life. *Walden* was equally a work of the imagination -- what purer? -- but it not only grew from experience (as did *The Blithedale Romance* and *Typee*), it also forced the reader back into experience; it called for action, if only the act of assimilating its reality to our reality, sharing Thoreau's consciousness. Novels do not ask this. It is the very premise of fiction that it leaves our daily lives alone. Novels offer distance -- a respite from reality, sometimes a comment on it, but most characteristically, a representation of it. One may be deeply moved by such imaginings, but that is not the point. They never require anything of us. Prophecy is alien to them.

(Taylor Stoehr, *Nay Saying in Concord: Emerson, Alcott and Thoreau* [Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979] 15.) Stoehr's point is of course that the Transcendentalists sought a form that would enable them to make prophetic utterances. I can agree with that, but his insistence that novels have no direct connection to life seems to me wrong. The novelists he mentions, Hawthorne and Melville, clearly valued fiction for its critical potential, the possibility it offers of imaginatively exploring the consequences of philosophical choices through character and action.

[9] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) 53.

[10] Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self : An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) 61.

[11] Anderson, 60.

[12] R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 9.

[13] Anderson 61.

[14] Emerson, *Journals* 6: 367.

[15] Hawthorne, *Tales* 491.

[16] Hawthorne, *Tales* 492.

[17] Hawthorne, *Tales* 492.

[18] Emerson, *Journals* 1: 115.

[19] Emerson, *Journals* 1: 195.

[20] Hawthorne 225.

[21] In his essay on Swedenborg, Emerson warns that symbols must not be confused with the spiritual value they represent: "True in transition, they become false if fixed." Again we see Emerson's concern with transition, with the flow of the actual into the ideal. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic," *Representative Men*, *Complete Works* ed, J. Elliot Cabot, 11 vols. [London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887] 4: 127.)

[22] Michael J. Colacurcio, "A Better Mode of Evidence: The Transcendental Problem of Faith and Spirit," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, LIV (First Quarter, 1969) 12 - 22.

[23] George Ripley, *Boston Daily* (Wed. 9 Nov. 1836); in The *Transcendentalists : An Anthology*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950) 160.

[24] Colacurcio 18.

[25] George Ripley, *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion Addressed to Doubters Who Wish to Believe*, 1836; Miller 135 - 136.

[26] Hawthorne, *Tales* 340.

[27] Hawthorne, *Tales* 353.

[28] Hawthorne, *Tales* 358.

[29] Hawthorne, *Tales* 346.

[30] Hawthorne, *Tales* 358.

[31] Hawthorne, *Tales* 306 - 307.

[32] Hawthorne, *Tales* 313.

[33] Hawthorne, *Tales* 314.

[34] Hawthorne, *Tales* 317.

[35] Hawthorne, *Tales* 318.

[36] Hawthorne, *Tales* 321.

[37] Hawthorne *Tales* 315.

[38] Hawthorne *Tales* 325.

[39] Hawthorne, *Tales* 311.

[40] Hawthorne, *Tales* 322.

[41] Hawthorne, *Tales* 321 - 322.

[42] Hawthorne, *Tales* 328.

[43] David Greene Haskins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Maternal Ancestors with Some Reminiscences of Him* (Boston: Cupples, Upham and Company, 1887) 115 - 117.

[44] Hawthorne, *Tales* 305.

[45] Hawthorne, *Tales* 321, 326.

[46] Hawthorne, *Tales* 264.

[47] Hawthorne, *Tales* 264.

[48] Hawthorne, *Tales* 265.

[49] Hawthorne, *Tales* 266 - 267.

[50] Hawthorne, *Tales* 267.

[51] Hawthorne, *Tales* 275.

[52] Hawthorne, *Tales* 276.

[53] Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 188.

[54] Hawthorne, *Tales* 278.

[55] Hawthorne, *Tales* 281.

[56] Emerson, "Circles," *Essays First Series* 2: 169.

[57] Emerson, "Circles" 171.

[58] Emerson, *Journals* 6: 242 - 243.

[59] Hawthorne, *Tales* 161 - 162.

[60] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 51.

[61] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 53.

[62] Emerson, *Journals* 2: 52.

[63] Emerson, "Circles" 318.

[64] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; New York: Collier Books and MacMillan Publishing Company, 1980) 182.

Conclusion

I began this study with references to the Puritans; I have ended it with the final passages of *The Great Gatsby*. Emerson himself worked between the two, and while he could never have envisaged the decadent world of the 1920s, or have survived in the spiritually rigorous world of the Puritans, he can be seen to be related to both, and at least partially responsible for the tragedy of misplaced ideals and social disconnection that occurs in *The Great Gatsby*. From the Puritans he acquired his life-long conviction of the irresistible power of the spoken word that must result if the speaker's words are those of -- not God, but -- Truth or the Over-soul. And from his Puritan forebears (perhaps even from his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson) he acquired a desire for a piety that could warm a heart he felt to be too cold, too much, one wonders, like the lukewarm hearts of the Unitarians to which he objected so strenuously. And from them, as H. B. Parkes and Yvor Winters both point out, he inherited a moral rectitude so strong as to make the notion of sin genuinely incomprehensible to him. But to Jay Gatsby he bequeathed a legacy of social irresponsibility, a conviction that true conversion is self-generated, and a self-reliance that enabled Gatsby to overlook the needs of those with whom he interacted in his conviction that reaching his own ideals justified whatever actions he took. From the Puritans through Emerson to Jay Gatsby runs a deep concern with spiritual power. The Puritans sought it by attempting to align themselves with the will of God, seeking to discern that will through prayer and careful interpretation of the scriptures. Jay Gatsby's method is simpler, and endorsed by Emerson -- he simply seeks to acquire control of his environment by amassing sufficient wealth to buy accurate reconstructions of once-meaningful cultural artifacts. For Gatsby, a dream and the money to try to realize it are power enough -- although ultimately his lofty idealism is destroyed by Tom Buchanan's brutality. I must say again (and in doing so I am doing no more than either Winters or Anderson) that in no way could Emerson have envisaged the uses that would be made of his ideas. That self-reliance would lead to a disregard for the needs of the community so

great as virtually to destroy the existence of community would never have occurred to him, nor can I imagine that he would have endorsed such a thing. But his professed indifference to the effects of his words was I believe sincere and makes him culpable for their negative consequences. I find it difficult to understand and impossible to forgive a thinker so obviously (even to himself, even at the time) influential refusing to care in what way his words were taken, or whether they might be incendiary.

It is currently popular to read Emerson as a clever and intentional deconstructionist who forces his reader's into a unique level of interaction with the text by virtue of his aggressive dislocations and refusal to follow rhetorical convention. I find this way of reading Emerson to be unsatisfactory. It ignores Emerson's works after the forties, without explaining them (were they failures? banal repetitions? and if so, how could a writer who had hit upon such a brilliant strategy abandon it so quickly?). I have followed Winters and Anderson in simply doing Emerson the courtesy of assuming that he meant what he said, and considering what the effects of those sayings would be. I have been assisted in this by the tales of Hawthorne, in which Emerson's contemporary subtly and sharply engaged in just such criticisms of the great Transcendentalist. Emerson disdained fiction, and yet the explorative freedom it offers permitted Hawthorne to take Emersonian concepts, give them life in the actions and choices of characters, and show his readers what might happen given such choices and such actors. I find the results to be deeply convincing -- the tragedy that results from the search for perfection in this life is profoundly moving. In Emerson's hands, the desire and its fulfillment are both deeply anti-social: the transcendent soul is one who has lost interest in society and recognized its worthlessness. The person who is convinced that he is his own saviour, and the more so the more he can assure himself of his uniqueness from others, is a person to be feared. And a society composed of such determinedly aloof individuals might be unimaginable, were it not for *The Great Gatsby*, a work populated by characters restlessly searching for a perfection and meaning that elude them. Tom's deep books, Daisy's white and gold dresses and tresses,

Nick's vague job in New York, and of course Gatsby's self-creation all reveal a society whose members were in full possession of a dream of perfection while lacking any meaningful connection to their culture. Self-reliant all, but connected none.

English Traits remains the one book that is, more or less, exempt from these charges of irresponsibility. In it, Emerson carefully considers his subject and in doing so proves that he is capable of astute social criticism (Matthew Arnold to the contrary). But it is only because his method in the book is to find the value of the actual that it transcends the better known and regrettably more influential works. Because it is an anomaly among Emerson's works, it seems unlikely that it will ever be much studied, and yet together with Coleridge's and Arnold's criticisms of English society, it offers an often astute critique. It too, however, is flawed by Emerson's fascination with power and wealth, both of which can, after all, offer a facsimile of perfection. The façade convinced Gatsby; it has convinced many North Americans, and we can all find our rationale in the essays of Emerson. Innocence of intention does not, I would argue, absolve him of blame.

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